SOLDIERS OF EMPIRE
INDIAN SEPOYS IN AND BEYOND THE IMPERIAL METROPOLE DURING THE
FIRST WORLD WAR, 1914-1919

A dissertation presented

by

Andrew Tait Jarboe

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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Abstract

In late 1914, the British Empire deployed Indian soldiers (called sepoys) to Europe in a desperate bid to halt the advancing German army and thereby save the Empire. Although a variety of studies have explored the subject of Indian soldiers in Europe, few venture beyond their military contributions to the situation on the Western Front. In contrast, I devote considerable attention to the more “intimate frontiers” of the British and German Empires, especially British hospitals for wounded sepoys and German prison camps where captured sepoys were detained. Comparison of the policy and practice of British and German military authorities, vis-à-vis Indian soldiers, is therefore one contribution of this work. I argue that tactical, military considerations and imperial concerns – namely, protecting racial hierarchies and the loyalty of Indian troops – shaped the experiences of sepoys in Europe. Yet this study does more than look at top-down approaches to Indian sepoys during the war. Drawing on Indian soldier letters and previously unconsidered testimonies collected by British and German government officials, I demonstrate that the sepoys were keenly aware of the countercurrents shaping their experiences in Europe. They engaged with, reshaped, and resisted many of the policies of the British and Germans, revealing in the process that they valued a safe return home far more than winning the battles of their “King-Emperor.” Finally, this dissertation demonstrates that the war and the deployment of sepoys to Europe had profound implications for people distant from the actual fighting. By comparing British, German and Indian newspaper accounts about the performance of Indian soldiers in Europe, I argue that the war led to an intensification of ideas about race for European audiences on
both sides of no-man’s-land, while in India accounts of the war fueled claims for racial
equality within the British Empire. In all these ways, this study shows that the
experiences of Indian soldiers in Europe during the First World War were embedded
within an interconnected imperial framework that included Britain, India, and Germany.
For MRJ
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Introduction
The First World War and the Imperial Moment

“To-day it has been my great good fortune to assist at the making of history,” wrote a correspondent to The Times on October 2, 1914. “I have seen the troops of one of the world’s most ancient civilizations set foot for the first time on the shores of Europe. I have seen proud Princes of India ride at the head of thousands of soldiers, Princes and men alike fired with the ardour of the East, determined to help win their Emperor’s battles or die.” The correspondent observed that since the outbreak of the war two months earlier, “Marseilles streets have echoed to the tread of a remarkable medley of soldiers,” from “picturesque Zouaves and Turcos from Algeria” to “swarthy Moors from Morocco” and “coal-black negroes from Senegal.” Though all had been received with heartiness, “the welcome the high-spirit Marseillais extended to the Indians transcended all others in spontaneity and warmth.” Every road within a mile of the docks “was a mass of excited Latins, and every second-storey window and every roof within a like area was a coveted vantage seat.” As for the Indian soldiers, “happier fighting men never landed in a country where death or glory was to be their goal.” Comparable to any martial force in the world, the Indian troops, our correspondent assured his readers, have only one fear: “It is that the war may be over before they get to the front!”¹

Desperate for bodies to halt the German onslaught in 1914, the British Empire deployed Indian and British soldiers belonging to the Lahore and Meerut Divisions to

¹ “The Indian Troops at Marseilles,” The Times, October 2, 1914.
France and the trenches outside Ypres in late October 1914. Over the next fourteen months, 20,748 British soldiers and 89,335 Indian sepoys – as Indian riflemen were known - supplemented by 49,273 Indian laborers, fought for the Indian Corps at the battles of Ypres, Festubert, Givenchy, Neuve Chapelle, Second Ypres, and Loos, suffering some 34,252 casualties. In late November 1915, the Indian Corps withdrew from the front lines and in December the soldiers embarked at Marseilles for fronts in the Middle East, leaving behind only a single Indian cavalry Division in France. The war on the Western Front had decimated the ranks of the Indian infantry, and commanders worried that another winter in the trenches might compel the sepoys to mutiny. The soldiers left the war in Europe quietly: there were no demonstrations or cheering crowds as there had been upon their arrival fourteen months prior. The Prince of Wales delivered to them a message from the King-Emperor, George V, who assured them: “In a warfare waged under new conditions and in particularly trying circumstances, you have worthily upheld the honour of the Empire and the great traditions of My Army in India.”

Although a variety of studies have explored the subject of Indian soldiers in Europe, few venture beyond their military contributions on the Western Front. In contrast, this dissertation devotes considerable attention to the more “intimate frontiers” of the British and German Empires, especially British hospitals for wounded sepoys and German prison camps where captured sepoys were detained. Comparison of the policy

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3 Merewether and Smith, Indian Corps, 463.
and practice of British and German military authorities, vis-à-vis Indian soldiers, is therefore one contribution of this work. I argue that imperial concerns – namely, protecting racial hierarchies and the loyalty of Indian troops – profoundly shaped the experiences of sepoys in Europe. Yet this study does more than look at top-down approaches to Indian sepoys during the war. Drawing on Indian soldier letters and previously unconsidered testimonies collected by British and German government officials, I demonstrate that the sepoys were keenly aware of the countercurrents shaping their experiences in Europe. They engaged with, reshaped, and resisted many of the policies of the British and Germans, revealing in the process that they valued a safe return home far more than winning the battles of their “King-Emperor.” Everyday forms of self-help and resistance like malingering in hospital, deserting to the German lines, or imploring friends and family in the Punjab to hide from British recruiters significantly limited the wartime ambitions of British policy makers and battlefield commanders.

Finally, this dissertation demonstrates that the war and the deployment of sepoys to Europe had profound implications for people distant from the actual fighting. By comparing British, German and Indian newspaper accounts about the performance of Indian soldiers in Europe, I argue that the war led to an intensification of ideas about race for European audiences on both sides of no-man’s-land, while in India accounts of the war fueled claims for racial equality within the British Empire. In all these ways, this study shows that the experiences of Indian soldiers in Europe during the First World War were embedded within an interconnected imperial framework that included Britain, India, and Germany.
Indian sepoys made only a minor contribution to the final military outcome on the Western Front. This work serves as a reminder that wars are not won or lost solely on the battlefield. Furthering a particular political ideology requires successfully manipulating the discourse about war and about the soldiers fighting. This work assesses the extent to which British policy makers controlled the flow of information and the movement of human beings across the globe so that British military commanders could exploit the manpower of India. That they succeeded to a certain degree is illustrated by the sheer volume of India’s material contribution to the imperial war effort: £100 million outright in 1914 and another £20 to £30 million each year thereafter alongside 1.4 million troops (most of whom fought in theaters other than the Western Front), the single largest contribution made by any of the colonies or dominions. Yet the Empire did not emerge from the war unaltered. India’s contribution to the war gave weight to nationalist demands for greater say within the imperial system. Secretary of State for India E.S. Montagu’s 1917 declaration that the goal of the Raj was responsible government for India within the Empire was both an acknowledgement of the increasing fragility of the Empire, as well as an attempt to entrench the British Empire against a changing world.\footnote{Judith M. Brown, “India,” in Judith M. Brown and Wm. Roger Louis, \textit{The Oxford History of the British Empire: Vol. IV: The Twentieth Century} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 429, 430.}

This dissertation is less a story of sepoys, trenches and stalemate, therefore, than it is a story of empire in an age of world war, one in which intra-imperial politics and inter-imperial rivalry profoundly shaped the lived experiences of soldiers. In this way, the story of a small group of soldiers deployed only temporarily to a nightmarish front in a
conflict fought a century ago provides a vivid snapshot of the world at dawn of the tumultuous twentieth-century.

**Indian Soldiers and the Imperial Turn in First World War Studies**

The temporary migration of nearly 138,000 Indian soldiers to the heart of Europe between 1914-15 was part of a wartime phenomenon in which the Entente powers drew on the resources of their global empires in order to defend the imperial metropole. Indeed, as our correspondent from the *Times* reminds us, Europe hosted a “remarkable medley of soldiers” from the very first days of the war on the Western Front. African soldiers serving in the French army first saw combat in Europe on August 21, 1914 when Senegalese troops joined in the abortive drive on Alsace Lorraine.\(^5\) During the war, about 500,000 of France’s colonial subjects from North Africa, West Africa, Indochina and Madagascar served alongside eight million French *poilus*, defending French soil from the German invaders.\(^6\) The British also drew on the manpower of their far-flung empire to supplement the nearly 4.9 million men mobilized for the army from the British Isles. Along the seven miles of trench held by the Indian Corps throughout 1915, one could find Muslims and Sikhs from the Punjab, Hindus from Rajasthan, Afghan Afridis from the Khyber Pass, or Gurkhas from the foothills of Nepal. Indeed, a visit to the British sector of the Western front at any given time might reveal not just Britons and Indian

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sepoys, but Anglo and First Nation Canadians, Newfoundlanders, Jamaicans, Australians, New Zealanders, Maoris, South Africans, or Egyptians.\textsuperscript{7} Navigating the length of the Western Front might require competency in a host of languages beyond just English, French and German.

Histories of the First World War began appearing almost as soon as the war broke out on the Western Front. Contemporaries understood that they were living through a momentous event of world-historical significance. These witnesses became the conflict’s first historians, and they applied the name “Great War” to it even before the close of 1915. In Germany, people used the term “Weltkrieg” to capture something of the conflict’s scale and significance even before the shooting started.\textsuperscript{8} In the United States, W.E.B. DuBois appreciated immediately the imperial and racial implications of the conflict and applied to it the term “World War.” In the November 1914 edition of The Crisis, he wrote, “To-day civilized nations are fighting like mad dogs over the right to own and exploit … darker peoples.” Although the track record of the Entente was far from ideal, DuBois preferred an English and French victory to that of a German.

Undoubtedly … the triumph of the allies would at least leave the plight of the colored races no worse than now. Indeed, considering the fact [that] black Africans and brown Indians and yellow Japanese are fighting for France and England it may be that they will

\textsuperscript{8} Hew Strachan, “The First World War as a global war,” First World War Studies 1.1 (2010), 4-5.
come out of this frightful welter of blood with new ideas of the essential equality of all men.  

Histories of the war disappeared from bookshelves during the war just as quickly as they appeared. Popular and scholarly interest in the First World War has not abated since, and the First World War remains one of the most studied and written-about topics in modern history.

Broadly speaking, the conflict’s historiography has gone through three configurations. From the war’s onset through the commencement of the Second World War, histories tended to focus on military and diplomatic matters. Jingoistic and self-serving titles explicitly devoted to the subject of the British Empire at war certainly made an appearance during this time. In general, however, matters of diplomacy dominated the scholarly agenda. In the wake of the Third Reich and the subsequent division of Europe into two polarized blocs, the historical agenda shifted away from matters of war origins to war aims, stressing above all the primacy of domestic politics. Fritz Fischer’s pioneering work, Griff nach der Weltmacht, argued that Germany deliberately provoked a world war in 1914 in order to secure hegemony in Central Europe. Meanwhile, a new generation of scholars reconfigured our understanding of the impact of war on society from the bottom up. The experiences of soldiers and the home front during wartime became the subject of countless dissertations and monographs. Paul Fussell’s The Great

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10 Sir Charles Prestwood Lucas, The Empire at War, Vol. 5 (Oxford University Press, 1926).
War and Modern Memory (1975) and John Keegan’s The Face of Battle (1976) signaled the swing to a third configuration, one concerned above all with the impact of war on society and culture. These works have engendered a rich understanding of how European wartime experience shaped a culture de guerre by placing such subjects as collective memory or the behavior of soldiers at the heart of historical inquiry. Scholars belonging to each of these configurations explored new terrains, blurred previously taken for granted spatial and temporal boundaries, and introduced new questions and methodologies to the study of the First World War.

Unfortunately, one readily forgets that sepoys fought in Europe during the First World War when reading such works. Even more recent, general histories of the war deprioritize the presence of the Indian Corps on the Western Front from 1914-15. John

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15 Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker’s 14-18 is an exception. See pages 150-154. Still, Indian and African soldiers only appear in this work only as a subject of the wartime ‘atrocity’ propaganda circulating between Germany, Britain, and France.
16 This point is raised by George Morton Jack in his recent article, “The Indian Army on the Western Front, 1914-1915: A Portrait of Collaboration,” War in History 13, 3 (2006), 331. See footnote 13 in which he cites such recent examples as: T. Wilson, The Myriad
Keegan makes only passing and dismissive reference to the Indian soldiers in France in *The First World War* (1998). He writes of the Indian soldiers upon their arrival in Europe, “though they included a high proportion of hardy Gurkhas, [they] were scarcely suitable for warfare in a European winter climate against a German army.” Once stalemate set in along the length of the Western Front, they offered nothing more than “barbaric flurries of slash and stab.” Statements like these have been endemic to the historical profession when writing about colonial soldiers. In his celebrated account of the battle of Verdun, Alistair Horne was not beyond reproducing early twentieth century racial stereotypes about North and West African soldiers. They were, in his words, “brave to the point of fanaticism on the attack,” but “strongly subject to temperament and less consistent fighters than the more dogged northerners.”


in World War I (2013), editors Andrew Jarboe and Richard Fogarty argue that scholars of the conflict must treat the globe as an integrated, if uneven, whole in order to recapture imperial dimensions that were readily apparent to the war’s contemporaries.\textsuperscript{20} These global histories offer a new framework for studying the war, one that that cuts across “the many insular, too often national particularisms,” that permeate academic fields in favor of an approach that is without “chronological, geographic, or topical constraints.”\textsuperscript{21} In The World in World Wars (2010), Heike Liebau et al unpack the social and cultural aspects of both world wars from African, South Asian, and Middle Eastern perspectives.\textsuperscript{22} In Santanu Das’ edited volume, Race, Empire and First World War Writing (2011), contributions explore the ways imperial ideologies and ideas about race informed wartime encounters between colonizers and the colonized in nearly every theatre of the war.\textsuperscript{23}

Concurrent with this trend is a steadily growing collection of journal articles, edited volumes, and monographs specifically devoted to the encounter between Europeans and colonial subjects in Europe. Christian Koller, for instance, has studied the

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\textsuperscript{22} Heike Liebau, Katrin Bromber, Katharina Lange, Dyala Hamzah and Ravi Ahuja, eds., The World in World Wars: Experiences, Perceptions and Perspectives from Africa and Asia (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010).
\textsuperscript{23} Santanu Das, ed., Race, Empire and First World War Writing (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). See especially contributions by Claude Markovits, Ravi Ahuja, and Santanu Das.

Historians of France’s African empire have gone the furthest in unpacking ways in which racism shaped the wartime experiences of colonial soldiers. The opening of the
French colonial archives allowed Gilbert Meynier (1981) to explore the case of Algerian soldiers in the war and Marc Michel (1982) to study that of Senegalese soldiers. Both historians were concerned less with the actual experiences of these soldiers and more with the way in which the French army exploited them.\(^{28}\) Drawing on oral interviews conducted in the early 1980s, Joe Lunn’s *Memoirs of the Maelstrom: A Senegalese Oral History of the First World War* (1999) marked the first attempt at weaving African soldier testimony into the story of the war in Western Europe.\(^{29}\) Illuminating through the work may be, some historians take issue with his claim that the French deployed Senegalese soldiers as cannon fodder.\(^{30}\) In *Race and War in France: Colonial Subjects in the French Army, 1914-1918* (2008), Richard Fogarty posits that even though the French Empire took Republican ideals of assimilation seriously – namely, that military service in defense of the Republic made one French – the French military and state readily deployed ideas about race to keep colonial subjects at arm’s length.\(^{31}\)

The subject of the Indian Corps in France is long overdue for a book-length study. The subject of India in the war was an industry unto itself in the years during and immediately following the war. Works of this first configuration, generally written by


officers associated with the Indian Corps, were self-serving accounts that affirmed imperial policy and the performance of white officers above all else.  

Cognizant of this fact, two works in particular, J.W.B. Merewether and Frederick Smith’s *The Indian Corps in France* (1918) and Lieutenant General James Willcocks’ *With the Indians in France* (1920), nonetheless remain invaluable resources for historians attempting to recreate an order of battle for the fourteen months the Indian Corps spent in France. But one does not have to dig far beneath the surface to detect the authors’ purpose. Relieved of his command of the Indian Corps in late 1915, General Willcocks spent the rest of the war as an out of favor commander looking for work. Desperate to salvage his own reputation at the end of the war, Willcocks wrote:

> So erroneous are many of the opinions and so ill-natured have been some of the criticisms of the part taken by the Indian Corps in Flanders that it has been impracticable to avoid writing strongly when I considered it necessary, and hence I have not hesitated to do so.  

And yet, the historical profession all but forgot about the Indian sepoys for nearly sixty years. In the 1980s, a series of articles by Jeffrey Greenhut upended suddenly the conclusions of Willcocks and the first wave of historians. In “The Imperial Reserve: The Indian Corps on the Western Front, 1914-15,” Greenhut argued that the history of the Indian Corps in France is “a history of failure.” From the first shock of combat, he

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33 Willcocks, *With the Indians in France*, xix.
contends, Indian soldiers proved they were not up to task of fighting a modern war and proved to be unreliable imperial allies. Greenhut allowed that the soldiers were not entirely to blame. In “Race, Sex, and War: The Impact of Race and Sex on Morale and Health Services for the Indian Corps on the Western Front, 1914,” he argued that British imperial ideology informed policies aimed at limiting Indian access to white British women. Such policies adversely affected the morale of the Indian Corps. In “Sahib and Sepoy: An Inquiry into the Relationship between the British Officers and Native Soldiers of the British Indian Army,” Greenhut showed further that British military and racial policy created a system whereby the white officer became essential to the performance of an Indian unit. As casualties of white officers in Indian units mounted through 1914-15, the fighting effectiveness of Indian units naturally deteriorated.

Since the publication of Greenhut’s work, the effectiveness of India’s troops during their deployment on the Western Front has generated a small collection of journal articles and chapters in edited volumes. Some works, like those of Byron Farwell, reference Greenhut’s work and uncritically reinforce his conclusions. Others like those of Gordon Corrigan, Robert McLain, David Morton Jack, and David Kenyon counter and

argue that despite material weaknesses, the Indian soldiers performed remarkably well between 1914-15.\textsuperscript{38} Drawing heavily on the letters of Indian soldiers, David Omissi has reinforced Greenhut’s conclusion that the morale of the Sepoys went into a steep decline with the onset of cold weather in late 1914 and again in 1915. He does suggest, however, that the bond between British officers and Indian men was not as close as the British liked to imagine.\textsuperscript{39} Still others posit that the Indian soldiers were neither better nor worse than European soldiers, but that more was unfairly expected of them.\textsuperscript{40}

While there is no reason to believe that this concern with combat effectiveness has run its course, far more useful for our purposes is the work of the “new military historians,” those who study the impact of war on society and culture. A growing number of works explore the role and function of the Indian Army more generally in British imperial schemes.\textsuperscript{41} Social histories of the Indian Army further consider the changing

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40 Charles Chenevix Trench, \textit{The Indian Army and the King’s Enemies, 1900-1947} (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 43.
\end{flushleft}
meanings and functions of military service in South Asia.\textsuperscript{42} These works certainly offer a valuable jumping-off point for this work, and contribute more generally to a growing appreciation for the myriad ways in which the First World War affected places distant from the actual fighting.\textsuperscript{43} They remind us, for instance, to look for ways in which the deployment of Indian troops to Europe reconstituted or reinforced imperial ideologies both in Europe and India. Accordingly, this dissertation considers representations of Indian troops in Indian newspapers alongside those found in British newspapers.

This dissertation also draws on a selection of works concerning Germany’s efforts at spreading global revolution and jihad during the First World War. The First World War was a clash of empires and a German victory likely would have altered the world map significantly. Historian Fritz Fischer demonstrated that India featured prominently in Germany’s wartime aims, and the promotion of independence of large parts of the British


\textsuperscript{43} The broader implications of World War I on social life in India remain largely unexplored, but historians have begun to acknowledge the part played by Indian veterans in postwar social movements. See: Susan C. VanKoski, \textit{The Indian Ex-soldier from the Eve of the First World War to Partition: a Study of Provisions for Ex-soldiers and Ex-soldiers’ Role in National Life} (unpublished Columbia University dissertation, 1996); and Nandini Gooptu, \textit{The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-century India} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
Empire was itself a war aim.\textsuperscript{44} When the Ottoman sultan declared a jihad on November 14, 1914, German authorities worked feverishly to foment religious upheaval in every corner of the British, French, and Russian empires. In \textit{The Berlin-Baghdad Express} (2010), Sean McMeekin uncovers the inner workings of the small group of Germans and Turks who brought holy war to the Middle East. Their aim was to topple the British and Russian Empires and then secure the political influence of the German and Ottoman Empire in the region.\textsuperscript{45} According to Hew Strachan, whose general works are among the few to take the jihad seriously, these efforts on the part of Germany made the 1914 war a world war.\textsuperscript{46} In \textit{Jihad made in Germany} (2001), Tilman Lüdke asks why Germany’s efforts to spread jihad failed. He argues that Germany overrated the power of pan-Islamic sentiment. Its propaganda agents, like those of the British, suffered from “manifold deficiencies in regard to organization and distribution and to the personalities of the individuals involved.”\textsuperscript{47} Unfortunately, Lüdke devotes very little attention to Germany’s attempts to reach India.

In similar fashion, only a small handful of works analyze German policy aimed at “converting” the sepoys in Europe. Gerhard Höpp and Margot Khaleyss examine German policy vis-à-vis Muslim prisoners of war interned at a prison camp outside Berlin.\textsuperscript{48} In his

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\textsuperscript{44} Fischer, \textit{Germany’s Aims}, 120.
\textsuperscript{45} Sean McMeekin, \textit{The Berlin-Baghdad Express: The Ottoman Empire and Germany’s Bid for World Power} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).
\textsuperscript{46} See Hew Strachan’s treatment on India in “Germany’s Global Strategy” in \textit{The First World War} (2001), 791-814.
\textsuperscript{47} Tilmann Lüdke, \textit{Jihad made in Germany: Ottoman and German Propaganda and Intelligence Operations in the First World War} (Munich: Lit Verlag, 2001).
\textsuperscript{48} Gerhard Höpp, \textit{Muslime in der Mark: asl Kriegsgefangene und Internierte in Wünsdorf und Zossen, 1914-1924} (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 1997); and Margot Khaleyss,
comprehensive account, *Muslime in der Mark* (1997), Höpp looks at the construction and day-to-day functioning of the camp. The actual experiences of Indian troops remain only a secondary concern, however. A spattering of chapters in edited volumes examine more closely German policy and representations of colonial prisoners of war, yet these also deemphasize Indian perspectives. In Chapter Four, this dissertation situates the experiences of Indian sepoys at Zossen front and center. The Germans tried to recruit sepoys to fight in the army of another one of Britain’s imperial rivals, Turkey. Some Indian soldiers were willing to collaborate with their captors. Others were not. This work also considers the matter of repatriation at the end of the war, when Indian prisoners of war faced the prospect of either a long-awaited return home, or more time behind bars.

**Methodology and Sources**

From a methodological standpoint, this work marks a significant departure from the established literature on the deployment of Indian soldiers to Europe. For starters, it is not a “traditional” military history. Generals, tactics and battlefield outcomes do have their place (see chapter 2), but they are far from the overriding focus. Instead, as the first book-length treatment of the Indian Corps to approach the subject using British, Indian and German documents, this work draws out both imperial and inter-imperial connections.


and dependencies. It compares representations of Indian sepoys found in newspapers and propaganda produced in England, Germany and the Punjab with representations made by the soldiers themselves. It also demonstrates that sepoys made choices during their time in Europe based on their understanding of the various inter-imperial countercurrents at work. Some of these choices, in turn, compelled British and German authorities to reformulate and revise policy. As “soldiers of empire,” sepoys were connected to, and embedded within, an inter-imperial social milieu, one that included Britain, France, India and Germany.

The impetus behind this approach rests in the burgeoning work of scholars of nineteenth- and twentieth-century European empires who stress the reciprocal nature of the imperial relationship. Since the publication of Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler’s Tensions of Empire (1997), scholars have increasingly recognized that imperial metropoles and colonies must be situated within “a single analytic field.”50 Europe’s colonies and its people were never empty vessels to be made over in Europe’s image: “the otherness of colonized persons was neither inherent nor stable; his or her difference had to be defined and maintained,” write Cooper and Stoler.51 Indeed, one of the most basic tensions of empire was that of inclusion and exclusion, “how a grammar of difference was continuously and vigilantly crafted as people in the colonies refashioned and contested European claims to superiority.”52

50 Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
51 Ibid, 7.
52 Ibid, 3-4.
Unpacking the political agendas underwriting representations of Indian soldiers emanating from Britain, Germany and India is central to this dissertation. After all, creating the Raj involved both establishing stable institutions of rule on the ground as well as forming a discourse to justify that rule. Europeans were well rehearsed in discussing India and “the East” long before Indian soldiers arrived in Europe in 1914. Edward W. Said termed this discourse “Orientalism,” and defined it as “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident.’” Orientalism was central to imperial rule.

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling it: in short: Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient … My contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively … European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self.

Historians following in the footsteps of Edward Said have revealed the centripetal nature of the imperial project, demonstrating that images of the colony and the colonial “other” were ubiquitous within the imperial metropole by the outbreak of the war in 1914.

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Colonial soldiers played a key role before the war in expanding and defending the British, French, and German empires overseas – a fact not lost on metropolitan audiences in 1914. Germany’s ventures overseas may have been short lived but scholars now readily acknowledge that the effects of colonialism on the German metropole were significant. What this means for us is that the newspaper reporters or military commanders who wrote about Indian soldiers were not neutral observers. They were men (in most cases) infused with the ideology of imperialism, committed to the colonial project in one guise or another.

If we acknowledge, then, the importance of discourse and knowledge to the imperial project, then it is important to venture beyond a story of the sepoys in the trenches. This dissertation devotes considerable attention to the more “intimate frontiers” of the British Empire – to the hospitals in England where Indian soldiers recuperated, for instance, or the camps and billets in France where sepoys enjoyed access to French women. The realm of the intimate is itself a growing subfield among world historians and scholars of empire who, in turn, trace their roots to the work of Ann Laura Stoler. In


57 Sebastian Conrad, German Colonialism: A Short History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); and Globalisation and the Nation in Imperial Germany (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power (2002), Stoler demonstrates that empires and imperial hierarchies were made not only by powerful statesmen and armies, but also in the quotidian, everyday encounters of people that either reinforced or blurred the boundaries between colonizers and colonized. In her work on nineteenth and twentieth century French and Dutch colonial history, she demonstrates: “colonial state projects … attended minutely to the distribution of appropriate affect … to the relations in which carnal desires could be safely directed,” and “to prescriptions for comportment that could distinguish colonizer from colonized.”

British authorities deployed Indian soldiers to Europe in an effort to save the British Empire. They also recognized that the war for the British Empire could just as easily be won or lost in the day-to-day treatment Indians received as they recuperated from wounds behind the lines. Intimate relations between sepoys and French or British women, moreover, could realign or upend entirely the Empire’s racial hierarchies.

It is just as important to account for ways in which Indian soldiers resisted imperial policy. More than three decades ago, the Subaltern Studies group turned the historiography of empire and of imperialism upside down by asking: “can the subaltern speak?”

58 Ann Laura Stoler, Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). Since the publication of this work, there has been a burgeoning interest in the subject of the human body as an imperial contact zone. See Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, Bodies in Contact: Rethinking Colonial Encounters in World History (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).
60 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, 78.
“subaltern,” to rewrite Indian colonial history from the perspective of non-elite actors such as peasants, jute mill workers, women, or untouchables. Ranajit Guha observed:

> The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism – colonialis elic and bourgeois-nationalist elitism. Both originated as the ideological product of British rule in India, but have survived the transfer of power and been assimilated to neo-colonialist and neo-nationalist forms of discourse in Britain and India respectively.⁶¹

Many works continue to write the history of twentieth-century India as one of empire versus nation. In this vein, the First World War matters because the British “were forced to reconsider many of their assumptions about India, particularly their dismissal of educated Indians as legitimate spokesmen for a modern Indian nation, and their projected timescale for political advance within the Empire.”⁶² The empire-nation binary is not satisfactory. Sepoys were rarely at any time mere imperial allies, nationalist converts, or revolutionary standard-bearers. They navigated a complicated and dangerous political landscape and resisted the simple classifications others tried to impose on them. The forms of resistance they practiced – malingering in hospitals, for example, or deserting to the German lines – might not fit the typical bill as being “political.” But then again, British imperialists and Indian nationalists were never comfortable imagining the peasant as the independent agent of political change that he in fact was.

This project draws on a wide variety of sources. Despite the heavy hand of wartime censorship, the products of print capitalism and material culture allow us to

approach the subject from the “bottom-up.” According to historian Benedict Anderson, print capitalism “[makes] it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways.”  

Newspapers, periodicals, broadsides and pamphlets from each of the major warring powers provide an opportunity to compare representations of Indian soldiers consumed by “ordinary” people embedded within an inter-imperial community. Perhaps most striking, English and German newspapers reproduced similar accounts of Indian sepoys. Comparison reveals that Europe’s wartime rivals shared common assumptions about race. Additionally, even as the German Foreign Office worked to foment rebellion in India, German propaganda intended for metropolitan audiences reinforced the ideologies of imperial rule. German propaganda emanating from the Foreign Office, for instance, readily reproduced blood-curdling images of Indian soldiers in order to sustain support for the war effort among the German population.

Print culture was global, and Punjabi newspapers offer an invaluable opportunity for comparison. Urban centers in the Punjab boasted a variety of English, Urdu and Gurmukhi language newspapers at the outbreak of the war, and British agents working in India collected, translated, and issued weekly reports on the content of the Indian press. Lahore was the epicenter of this industry, where readers could choose from more than 70 titles in August 1914. That same month, Amritsar housed at least 28 newspapers, Rawalpindi had at least seven, and Jullundur offered three. Most newspapers had a circulation of fewer than 1,000 copies. Some, like the English-language Tribune, printed

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in Lahore, had a modest daily run of 2,000 copies. Competing for an English-language readership was the *Panjabee*, which circulated 2,400 copies daily. These dailies shared the streets with Bal Kishen’s Urdu-language *Akhbar-i-‘Am*, which printed 1,000 copies each day. The largest Lahore daily was the Urdu-language *Zamindar*, edited by Zafar Ali, which circulated 15,000 copies. The only other Urdu newspaper that could match the circulation of *Zamindar* was *Hindustan*, offered to Lahore readers on a weekly basis.¹⁴

Punjabi newspapers remind us that empires, like nations, were “imagined political communities,” able to arouse deep attachments, affinities or criticisms. The translations of Punjabi newspapers compiled by Government of India offer fascinating and rarely considered viewpoints.

These newspapers, moreover, provide access to many of the wartime rumors circulating through the Punjab overlooked by British authorities. The Subaltern Studies group identified rumor as a critical means of subaltern communication in the mobilization of insurgency.¹⁵ Recent scholarly interest in the shaping of memory has compelled some scholars to trace the circulation of war news within Asia and Africa in forms ranging from propaganda to rumor.¹⁶ This dissertation considers rumors reported in the Punjabi press alongside reports drafted by officials and intelligence officers stationed throughout the British Empire, insofar as they are germane to the topic of Indian soldiers in Europe.

¹⁴ IOR L/R/5/195 – 200, Punjab Newspaper Reports.
Finally, the correspondence and testimony of the Indian soldiers who fought in France are central to this project. The closest we can get to the Indian soldiers today is a compilation of their letters found in the reports of the censor of Indian mail, E. B. Howell. Towards the end of September 1914, as the Indians began arriving in France, British authorities decided that their correspondence should be subjected to systematic examination. Lieutenant and later Captain E.B. Howell, a member of the Political Department of the Indian Civil Service attached to a regiment of Indian cavalry, was appointed Censor of Indian mails and set up his offices in Rouen at the Indian Base Post Office in November 1914. The station later moved to Boulogne. His original instructions required him only to examine the “inward” mails addressed to the troops in France, no small task at a time when inward correspondence amounted to some 200 letters each week for each regiment of the Corps. Soon, the Censor’s office expanded its operation to include “outward” mails, as well as post from one part of the force to another.67

From 1914-15, Howell provided military authorities with weekly reports summarizing the content and tenor of Indian soldier letters. He also included a large selection of translated excerpts with each report. As David Omissi has pointed out, these excerpts of Indian soldier letters constitute an imperfect source: “When reading the letters, we are not simply eavesdropping on the innermost thoughts of the soldiers or looking invisibly over their shoulders as they write. Layers of filtration come between the thoughts of the sepoys and the surviving evidence.”68 Most soldiers did not pen their own

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68 Omissi, Indian Voices, 4.
letters, but dictated them to a literate friend or officer. This dynamic alone may have changed what the soldier was prepared to say. Despite efforts to conceal the working of the Censor’s office from the troops, by April 1915 troops at the front knew that their letters were passing through the hands of men who were not their immediate superior officers.\textsuperscript{69}

Yet these letters constitute an invaluable source for three reasons. First, they were the chief link between human beings on opposite sides of the planet, proof that even peasants from the Punjab were interested in and capable of forming global connections. Second, the content of these letters reveals a variety of perspectives on the deployment of Indian troops to Europe beyond those sanctioned by imperial authorities or metropolitan newspapers. Third, authorities attempted not only to monitor and control these perspectives; they used them to inform wartime imperial policy. This dissertation also draws on a small collection of letters written by Indian soldiers in captivity in Germany, as well as the testimony of recently captured Indians collected by German officials working behind the frontlines. These sources reveal that Indian sepoys tried to turn the clash between Britain and Germany to some modicum of advantage.

Official government and military correspondence will also be important for accessing a “top-down” perspective on Indian soldiers and their place in the war and Anglo-German imperial relations. British administrators, for instance, in an effort to keep the loyalty of their Indian subjects, were particularly diligent about maintaining excellent conditions at the Indian hospitals established in England and France. The correspondence

\textsuperscript{69} Omissi, \textit{Indian Voices}, 8.
and reports of Sir Walter Lawrence, the Commissioner of Indian Hospitals, to Lord Kitchener, reveal plainly that a lot more than the health of the sepoys was at stake at hospitals in Brighton or Marseilles. Meanwhile, correspondence between the India Office and freelance propagandists reveals that the priorities of the British Empire shifted over the course of the war, a fact also reflected in orders written by Lord French in the summer of 1915. Documents produced by the German Foreign Office, meanwhile, reveal that German authorities genuinely believed that the global jihad was their best chance at toppling British rule in India. What emerges is a story of profound world historical resonance, its agents hailing from Europe and Asia.

**Scope and Sequence**

The five chapters of this dissertation are organized chronologically and spatially. This organizational scheme reflects two of the dissertation’s underlying premises. First, human beings encountered empire and rehearsed or altered imperial ideologies in everyday spaces. The frontlines in France and Belgium where Indian soldiers engaged in the business of killing; the hospitals in England where they recovered from wounds; the prison camps in Germany where sepoys waited out the war – these local sites hosted

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70 On “everydayness” and race, see Thomas C. Holt, “Marking: Race, Race-making, and the Writing of History,” *American Historical Review* 100. 1 (Feb., 1995), 1-17. Holt notes that the “Everyday” as a philosophical concept emerged in the wake of the First World War. It referred to “that part of human activity and consciousness left over after politics, wars, and the other big subjects and events have been addressed.” To study the everyday is not to privilege that above other aspects of the human experience, but to “elaborate the nexus between the remote or global levels of that experience and its immediate or micro-local expressions.” Or, as Holt says Henri Lefebvre put it, “it is at the level of the everyday that global phenomena are enacted.”

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global and imperial encounters. Second, for all that the stalemate of the Western Front has come to dominate both the conflict’s historiography and popular memory, human beings displayed a remarkable degree of mobility during the First World War. Wartime exigencies and imperial rivalry facilitated the movement of hundreds of thousands of colonial subjects across oceans and continents, starting in earnest in 1914 and lasting into the years immediately following the 1918 armistice.

Chapter One focuses on the decision in 1914 to bring Indian soldiers to Europe. It demonstrates that this decision was fraught with imperial concerns beyond simply those of the battlefield. For many in Britain and India, the mobilization of Indian soldiers and their arrival in Europe in late September 1914 served diverging political agendas. For those in Britain, the policy provided affirmation of imperial policy and the British presence in India. For Indians, the deployment of sepoys to Europe promised the benefits, perhaps political rewards, of serving the Empire at a time of dire necessity. Yet German policy makers and the general public were no less imperially minded that their British and Indian counterparts, and for them this moment held out the promise of breaking British global supremacy. Chapter One also examines the variety of ways people in the recruiting districts of India responded to the outbreak of war. From early on, it shows, Indian peasants and soldiers found ways of resisting the imperial war machine.

Chapter Two follows the sepoys from their landing at Marseilles to frontlines outside Ypres. As Indian soldiers acclimated to the trials and hardships of the front, their British commanders expected them to hold a vital sector at a time when the Entente was desperate for bodies. In England, newspapers and propaganda regaled audiences with the
exploits of Indian soldiers, reinforcing the racial ideologies of imperial rule in the process. Indians, for their part, appreciated the scale and significance of the fighting in France and generally maintained that they were up to the task. Germans soldiers tended to agree. The German Foreign Office, however, looking to rebound in the court of public opinion after the drubbing it had taken for invading neutral Belgium, began a propaganda campaign highlighting the atrocities purportedly committed by Indian soldiers. This racist propaganda reinforced the ideologies of imperial rule at a time when Germany and its Ghadar allies were trying to inspire sepoys at the front to mutiny. As casualties reduced the Indian regiments to mere skeletons of what they had been, Indian soldiers began to claim that their commanders deployed them as cannon fodder. With no end to the fighting in sight, some Indian soldiers chose to desert to the Germans. They did this based on their understanding of the geopolitical situation, believing that their chances of getting home in one piece were better with the Germans than with the British.

Chapter Three proceeds to the hospitals in France and England established by British authorities for the large number of wounded Indian soldiers. The First World War was among the first in world history where most soldiers stood a decent chance of surviving a wound and returning to the fighting once healed. The correspondence of the Commissioner of the Indian Hospitals reveals that these hospitals tried to do more than just repair damaged bodies. They were themselves instruments of propaganda intended to retain the loyalty of the sepoys and impress upon Indian audiences the gratitude of the British Empire. Hospitals for Indian soldiers could also help sustain support for the war effort at home and for Britain’s imperial presence in South Asia by reminding
metropolitan audiences of the contributions of its Indian subjects. While some wounded Indians no doubt appreciated the lengths to which hospital administrators went to heal their damaged bodies, they complained bitterly about British military policy in two important regards. First, they objected to returning to the front. Second, they protested the strict regime of segregation enforced at the hospitals. Just as importantly, they found ways of resisting both. Meanwhile, from the safety of their hospital beds, they also wrote home about the horrors of the war. Many instructed friends and family members not to enlist. The letters written by wounded Indians profoundly interfered with recruiting efforts in the Punjab. The British Empire, in order to keep Indian armies in the field in a rapidly expanding global conflict, intensified recruiting efforts.

Chapter Four looks to the other side of no-man’s-land, to a prison camp outside Berlin. At the Halbmondlager, or Crescent Moon Camp in Zossen, German authorities concentrated Indian prisoners of war from the end of 1914 through early 1917. German policy stipulated that Indian soldiers were to enjoy special treatment in the hope that they might switch their allegiances to the German and Ottoman empires. Zossen was the epicenter of Germany’s attempts to recruit soldiers for a global Holy War. Its recruits would carry revolution to the gates of India. Yet at the same time, propaganda intended for German audiences about Zossen readily reproduced orientalist tropes and racial stereotypes, reinforcing many of the same ideologies used to justify British rule in India. Indian soldiers interned in the German Reich had a choice to make: they could collaborate with their captors, or they could resist. Either choice came with considerable risk. Some sepoys resisted, some collaborated and some oscillated between collaboration
and resistance at various times for a variety of reasons. Finally, in early 1916, 44 Indian prisoners joined a volunteer battalion and departed for Constantinople. They joined because they believed the venture might afford them a chance to get home. British intelligence in the Middle East hurried to intercept German-led expeditions bound for the gates of India. These expeditions very nearly brought revolution to the British Raj.

Chapter Five explores the inter-imperial dynamics surrounding the removal of Indian soldiers from Europe from late 1915 through the end of the war. British policy makers, ever mindful of the deteriorating effectiveness of the Indian infantry, decided near the end of 1915 to withdraw Indian sepoys from France for other fronts. But imperial concerns also weighed heavily on decision makers in 1915. Many worried that if they asked the sepoys to endure another winter of fighting in Europe, the soldiers might rebel. Others worried that the high casualty rates incurred by white British officers within the Indian Corps unsettled the Empire’s racial hierarchies. When the war finally ended, hundreds of Indian prisoners fell back into British hands. British authorities were not prepared to let all of the soldiers go home. Soldiers underwent interrogations to determine who had remained loyal while in captivity and who had not. Some of the Indian prisoners who had cooperated with the Germans during the war chose to remain in Berlin after the November 11 armistice. Others tried to secure their own passage home. One of them, with his German wife and their infant in tow, returned safely to Afghanistan 1921, seven years after first embarking at Karachi for the Western Front.
Chapter One

Arrival

Having left India a month earlier, the first convoy of Indian soldiers arrived at Marseilles on the morning of September 26, 1914. The first ships to berth belonged to the British India Company, the Mongara and the Castilia. They carried between them a battery of Royal Horse Artillery, a Signal Company, a Field Ambulance, and part of a Mule Corps. The following day, two ships weighed down by the 15th Lancers, a cavalry battalion, took their place at the docks. In Mulk Raj Anand’s Across the Black Waters (1939), Lal Singh and his comrades of the fictional 69th Rifles quickly forget the card game they had been playing on board their steam ship and run excitedly to the edge of the deck to catch a glimpse of “Marsels,” as they call it. “The sun was on its downward stride on the western horizon as the convoy ships went steaming up towards the coast of France, with their cargo of the first Division of Indian troops who had been brought to Europe,” Anand writes, “a cargo stranger than any they had carried before.”

Ten years earlier, planners in the War Office in London predicted that any conflict between Britain and Germany would be “a struggle between an elephant and a whale in which each, although supreme in its own element, would find it difficult to bring its strength to bear on its antagonist.” Britain was a sea power, its worldwide empire held together by the guns of the imperial navy. As of August 12, when the single cavalry division and four infantry divisions belonging to the British Expeditionary Force began

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71 Merewether and Smith, Indian Corps, 15-16.
landing at Le Havre, Boulogne and Rouen, the only additional regular troops immediately available to the Empire were those of the Indian Army. And although Britain’s all-regular force very quickly proved at the Mons-Condé Canal on August 23 that a well-trained British soldier, adept at firing fifteen well-aimed shots a minute with his Lee-Enfield Rifle, could wreck havoc on advancing German troops, the fact remained: the Empire required bodies on the Western Front just as fast as it could get them.

The decision to bring Indian soldiers to Europe was fraught with imperial concerns. Of course, the British Empire had to win the war in France in order to emerge from the war unaltered in any significant way. Tactical considerations certainly weighed heavily on decision makers at an emergency war council meeting at 10 Downing Street on August 6 when they decided to mobilize the Indian Army. Yet even the most militarily minded supporters of the decision to bring to Europe “a cargo stranger than any they had carried before” understood that the Indian troops could pay dividends for the Empire or its subjects beyond the reaches of the frontlines. First, this chapter demonstrates that for many in Britain, the arrival of Indian soldiers in Europe provided reassurance that in the moment of the Empire’s greatest trial, India remained staunchly loyal and committed to continued British rule. The chapter then explores German reactions to British imperial policy. It demonstrates that German policy makers and the general public were no less imperially minded than the British. For them, the deployment of Indian troops to Europe and Germany’s alliance with Turkey held out the promise of breaking British hegemony in the East. The third and final part of this chapter takes into account Indian perspectives. It reveals that the outbreak of the war elicited a variety of responses in India beyond what

74 “The Indian Troops at Marseilles,” The Times, October 2, 1914.
European newspapers and propaganda told their metropolitan audiences. To be sure, the deployment of sepoys to Europe held out the benefits owed for serving the Empire at a time of dire necessity. Yet what the British called enthusiasm was more likely shrewd decision making, made by subalterns trying to secure what little remission they could from a British Empire intent on mobilizing the resources of India for war in Europe. The outbreak of war in Europe also caused considerable anxiety among the populations that would be called upon to do the actual fighting. Significantly, some sepoys and peasants found ways of resisting imperial policy.

1914 and the Imperial Moment

The decision to deploy Indian soldiers to Europe was a noted departure from imperial practice. Indians had been serving British interests as soldiers since the days of the East India Company, but by 1914 they constituted an army trained, equipped, and experienced primarily at policing the volatile Northwest frontiers of the Raj. If and when Indian soldiers did go overseas, they did so to secure imperial interests at places along the rim of the Indian Ocean: to Egypt, for instance, or China. In 1873, Captain T.C.S. Speedy, a part-time Lieutenant in the 10th Punjabi Regiment, recruited 200 Sikhs and Pathans (Afghan tribesmen) on behalf of a petty chieftain in Malaya, who planned to use them to subdue the growing power of Chinese clans in the state. With the formal extension of British authority into Malaya the following year, Speedy deployed his force to the country as the Perak Armed Police where it continued to serve under various guises until
Crossing the black waters of the Indian Ocean was therefore something to which Indian soldiers were accustomed by the outbreak of the First World War.

Yet the decision to deploy sepoys to Europe in August 1914 remains exceptional: for the first time, Indian troops fought to defend the imperial metropole against another (white) European power. Two previous “imperial moments” convinced British policy makers to mobilize the Indian Army against Germany: the Indian Rebellion of 1857, and the South African War of 1899. Metropolitan newspapers and propaganda trumpeted the arrival of Indian troops, reassuring British audiences that India remained staunchly loyal. As British soldiers began digging in at the front, representations of Indian troops in late 1914 entrenched the ideologies underlying imperial rule: namely, that Britain’s colonial subjects wanted British rule and tutelage.

The Indian Rebellion of 1857 taught the British that if they lost the loyalty of the Indian Army, it could easily cost them their Indian Empire. On May 10, 1857, the 11th and 20th Bengal Native Infantry Regiments as well as the 3rd Light Cavalry stationed in Meerut mutinied, murdered their European officers, and began marching southwards to Delhi. Sepoy grievances had been mounting over the previous decade, caused largely by growing dissatisfaction with service conditions. In 1850, the 66th Native Infantry Regiment stationed outside Calcutta mutinied when military authorities decided to withdraw compensatory allowances for services in the recently annexed territory of Punjab. The General Service Act of 1856 stipulated that all sepoys, irrespective of caste,

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would be deemed eligible for overseas service. For many high-caste Rajputs and Brahmins, crossing the “black waters” meant a loss of caste. When authorities further decided to open the Punjab to Sikh recruitment, these soldiers felt their monopoly on military service, crucial to their economic wellbeing, under threat. British authorities at last provided the spark needed to set the powder keg alight when they issued cartridges greased with cow and pig fat – an insult to Muslim and Hindu soldiers alike who believed that the British were trying to pollute the soldiers so that they might be converted to Christianity. As the mutinous soldiers marched on Delhi on May 10, rumor spread that the city had already fallen to the soldiers and that Bahadur Shah II had been proclaimed Emperor of Hindustan. What began as a localized mutiny then exploded into a full-scale military and civil rebellion that quickly consumed most of north-central India. The rebellion lasted until June 1858 when the last of the rebel strongholds in Gwalior finally fell to the British.\(^76\)

This force of Indian soldiers that very nearly drove the British out of India traced its origins to humbler beginnings. In the seventeenth century, the East India Company began employing an irregular force of a few hundred Indian troops who guarded four to five company-owned factories. By 1856, however, the body had grown to become one of India’s largest employers, with a force of 214,985 native troops supplemented by 39,375 Europeans. This army consisted of three distinct presidency armies, each with its own commander-in-chief and each with its own distinct recruiting areas. Of these, the Bengal Army – which drew its recruits mainly from high-caste Rajputs and Brahmans from the

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Purabiya region of Avadh and Bihar - was the largest, boasting 137,000 regulars and 20,000 cavalry. It was the bulk of this army that rebelled in 1857-58, shaking British confidence to the core.\(^77\)

The Rebellion of 1857 convinced policy makers that they needed to find a new source of colonial soldiers to secure the jewel of the Empire. The composition of the Bengal army changed drastically the following year. Grateful to the nearly 30,000 Punjabis remained loyal and even helped put down the rebellion the British began immediately to replace “disgraced” Bengal units with soldiers mustered in the Punjab. By June 1858, of the 80,000 “native” troops in the Bengal army, 75,000 were Punjabis, with Sikhs alone numbering 23,000.\(^78\) Recruitment in India remained largely haphazard and accidental for some time after, but Russian expansion into Central Asia in the 1880s combined with the disappointing performance of the Indian Army in various border wars left key British observers doubting whether the Indian Army could take on a Western power. From then on, the search for the best fighting material, the so-called “martial races,” became an imperial obsession.

The idea that certain “races” in India – just as readily referred to as “classes” – had a natural proclivity to military service had received a degree of currency as early as 1819 when a Briton by the name of Hamilton began referring to Nepal’s “martial tribes.”\(^79\) During the Second Sikh War (1848-49), another British General wrote that the Sikhs were “naturally brave.” Following the explosion of social Darwinist racial theories

\(^78\) Ibid, 11.
at the end of the nineteenth century, writes Heather Streets, “the idea that some groups of people were more martial that others found ‘scientific’ justification.” Guided by this thinking, and with an eye on Russian encroachment on Central Asia, Britain’s recruiting biases in India shifted consistently in favor of the Punjab, the North West Frontier, and Nepal. In January of 1893, for instance, these three regions provided 44 percent of the Indian Army’s manpower. By 1914, nearly 75 percent of the Indian Army came from Punjab, the Frontier, and Nepal.

Recruitment into the Indian Army did not affect the peoples of these regions evenly. Rather, recruitment was restricted by the “martial class” doctrine, which held that only certain races or classes had the capacity for war and military service. Recruitment handbooks in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century repeatedly attributed to India’s martial races characteristics such as self-sufficiency, physical and moral resilience, orderliness, fighting prowess, and a sense of courage and loyalty. Within the Punjab, only the selected group of martial classes – Sikhs, Punjab Muslims, Dogras and Hindu Jats – were eligible for recruitment. The British then segregated each regiment of the Indian Army, or each company within a regiment, along class lines. The 15th Sikhs, was a “class regiment,” made up of eight companies of Sikhs. The 58th Rifles, on the other hand, segregated different classes into different companies. It comprised three companies of Sikhs, one of Dogras, three of Pathans, and one of Punjabi Muslims. The 59th Rifles consisted of three companies of Pathans, one of Punjabi Muslims, two of

80 Streets, Martial Races, 8.
81 Omissi, The Sepoy and the Raj, 19.
83 Tan Tai-Yong, Garrison State, 70-71.
Sikhs, and two of Dogras. If a Punjabi Muslim company took casualties during an expedition, British recruiters looked for their replacements among a select few socially dominant Muslim tribes such as the Gakhhars, Januas and Awans, and a few Rajput tribes, from the Rawalpindi and Jhelum districts in the northern Salt Range of the Punjab. From the point of view of regimental efficiency, “getting the right type of recruits for the regiments was important: there was a need to preserve the clan purity of the regiment or the company because the solidarity and morale of the regiment often hinged on the shared values and traditions of the men who made up the regiment.” The social structure of the village, likewise, was typically replicated within the company or regiment: the authority of a Subedar Major (sergeant) was generally reinforced by his position as a village elder. The localization of recruitment had a political purpose too: by recruiting evenly among different populations who, it was believed, harbored traditional or historical animosities, the British prevented any single group from becoming dominant within the military: it was a classic example of “divide and rule.”

Far from being a phenomenon limited to British India, however, martial race doctrine received wide currency within metropolitan newspapers and periodicals. Popular ethnography traced the origins of India’s martial races to the age of Alexander the Great. Frederick Roberts, Commander-in-Chief in India during the heyday of Victorian imperialism (1885-93), had been deeply conditioned by his experiences in the 1857 Rebellion and believed that the soldiers who had proven their worth during that episode –

84 Ibid, 74.
85 Ibid, 75.
86 Ibid, 76
namely, Scottish Highlanders, Sikhs, and Nepalese Gurkhas – embodied the physical and masculine qualities of ideal soldiers. Roberts became a national celebrity during the Second Afghan War in 1880 when he successfully commanded a 320-mile march from Kabul to Kandahar to rescue a beleaguered British garrison. Later, during his time as Commander-in-Chief, he used his celebrity status and political connections to publish a number of magazine and newspaper articles in order to buoy metropolitan support for martial race doctrine and British expansion into Northwest India and Central Asia.  

On the eve of the First World War, Roberts and martial race doctrine remained firmly embedded in British popular thinking. Major George MacMunn’s *The Armies of India* (1911) reminded metropolitan readers: “It is one of the essential differences between the East and the West, that in the East, with certain exceptions, only certain clans and classes can bear arms; the others have not the physical courage necessary for the warrior.” Sikhs, Dogras, Pathans, Rajputs, Jãts, and Gurkhas – these (among others) were the “military races of India” that made possible the wide reach of the British Empire. Each of the martial races, MacMunn explained, was of a particular and distinct phenotype. The “slow wit and dogged courage” of the Sikh, he purported, “give him many of the characteristics of the British soldier at his best.”

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90 MacMunn’s descriptions of India’s martial races offer an interesting commentary on what the British thought of their own working class soldiers who flocked to the ranks of Kitchener’s New Army after the outbreak of the war. In part, the reason the British continued to send wave after wave of men to their deaths late into the war was because they did not believe “slow witted” (working class) soldiers were capable of the kind of dash and improvisation German frontline infantry were trained to perform. See further
hailing from the mountainous regions of what now constitutes the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, were “hardy, active, alert, and inured to war.” Afridis in particular, from the Khyber Pass, were “intensely republican or, more accurately, democratic, at times even paying no heed to their counsels of elders, every man a law unto himself. They serve in our army more than any other class, and are famous as good soldiers, and, of course, excel as skirmishers.” Further south in Waziristan, the British recruited from the Mahsud clans, the Darwesh Khel, and other Wazir clans. “They give us immense trouble, but make remarkably fine soldiers, especially when, as in the case of the Irish, they serve away from their own land.” MacMunn asserted, “The clans are all, with the exception perhaps of the Afridis, intensely fanatical when stirred by the roll of the drum ecclesiastic.”

The newly appointed commander of the Indian Corps in 1914, Lieutenant-General James Willcocks, was also a disciple of the martial races ideology. Born in 1857, Lawrence’s career had been one of exploits and campaigns overseas: the Afghan campaign of 1879-80, the Waziri expedition of 1881, the Soudan in 1885, Burma from 1886-89, West Africa, South Africa. In 1914, only two other officers in France held more seniority than Lawrence: Haig and French. The Gurkha, he wrote after the war, “has a big heart in small body; he has the dogged characteristic of the Britisher; he will return to a trench from which he has been driven, and it will not be so easy to turn him out a second time.” Taciturn, brave, and “loyal to a degree,” Willcocks considered Nepalese Gurkhas second to none. He described the Dogras as “quiet, steady, clean


91 MacMunn, Armies of India, 129-172.
92 Merewether and Smith, Indian Corps, 17-18.
soldiers, of refined appearance.” The Sikh “has grievances born of his own imagination, and can be troublesome when it is most inconvenient for him to be so, but he is a fine manly soldier, will share your trials with genuine good humour, and can always save something in cash out of nothing.” Jats were “strapping big men as a rule, slow in movement and decision … not brilliant, but very reliable,” while Pathans “have quicker wits than the other races.” Each race, he finished, had its own characteristics:

by mixing them you get a combination of elan, stubbornness, and endurance; you make it easier to maintain one form of discipline for all classes; and while giving full play to each religion and its prejudices, you eliminate the narrow-mindedness that springs of clannishness in Eastern peoples.93

Men from Nepal or the Punjab, so metropolitan audiences were led to believe, enlisted in the army because they were naturally drawn to military service. “The English soldier does not always come to the ranks because it is the most honorable career he knows,” wrote MacMunn. “The Indian soldier does.”94

Yet such claims do not stand up to scrutiny. Pushing beyond the romantic rhetoric of martial race discourse reveals that for the men who enlisted in the Indian Army, theirs was much more a story about making a living than one of any natural predilection for martial exploits. India’s largest pool of recruits, the Punjab, experienced dramatic social and economic changes in the nineteenth century as a result of its annexation by the British Empire in 1849 and subsequent integration into global markets. An already impoverished region became increasingly dependent on fluctuations in the global wheat market as well as ready access to cash. Debt-ridden peasant families supplemented the family income through military service. Young Punjabi men, in other words, became

94 Ibid, 142.
soldiers in order to secure the financial solvency of their families who had to compete in a seemingly unpredictable and remorseless global market. Sikhs, Dogras, Pathans and Gurkhas – in short, India’s martial races – these men joined the military not because they loved it, but because they had to.\footnote{Streets, \textit{Martial Races}, 195.}

Thus, the Indian soldiers deployed to Europe in 1914 represented only a narrow segment of the demographic diversity of the Indian subcontinent, what British experts and ordinary readers had come to identify as the “martial races” of India. A significant portion of the soldiers on their way to Europe could not even be called Indian: six regiments of Gurkhas hailed from independent Nepal. Most of the soldiers came from the Punjab: on the eve of the war, Punjabis accounted for 66 percent of all Indian cavalrymen, 87 percent of all artillerymen, and 45 percent of all infantrymen in the Indian Army.\footnote{Tan Tai-Yong, \textit{Garrison State}, 18.} From the perspective of British audiences, these men served in the Indian Army because they wanted to and, with the memory of 1857 never far in the background, because they had proven their steadfast loyalty to the Empire.

And yet the specter of rebellion continued to haunt the Indian Army, revived by another imperial moment: the outbreak of the South African War in 1899. Many prominent British ‘experts’ believed in October 1899 when fighting broke out in South Africa that the affair would be over by Christmas. Two and a half years of fighting, marked early on by the ‘Black Week’ in December 1899 when the British Army experienced three separate defeats in the span of seven days, dashed that notion. Indeed, if the war taught British audiences anything, it was that the era of effortless world
domination by the British Empire had passed. What was the British Army to do, for instance, in the event of a war against a fully modern Continental power such as Germany? Admiral Tirpitz, the Reich’s new Secretary of State of the Imperial Naval Office, had already thrown down the gauntlet. The naval laws of 1898 committed Germany to bringing the strength of the Imperial Navy up to 19 battleships, 8 coastal armored ships, 12 large and 30 small cruisers, and a supporting force of torpedo boats, special ships, and training vessels. Only two years later, citing the unsettling effects of the Spanish-American War in addition to the worsening situation in South Africa, Tirpitz pushed a Supplementary Bill through the Reichstag, doubling the number of battleships.

The South African War also taught British audiences that winning wars in the twentieth century required manpower – lots of it. Some 448,435 imperial soldiers fought for the British Empire between 1899-1902. The white dominions of Australia, New Zealand and Canada supplied more than 30,000 of those troops. Although two Irish brigades fought with the Boers, many more Irishmen enlisted to fight for the Empire. Curiously, however, Indian soldiers did not fight in the South African War. In fact, British statesmen expressly forbade the Indian Army from taking part. In December 1899, the Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon, offered the services of the Indian Army only to be told that the sepoys would not be needed. Even India’s princes who came forward to offer the services of their troops were rebuked. Why? Racial concerns were paramount.

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Before the outbreak of war that summer, at a time when the Secretary of State for War thought about 100,000 more men would be needed, the Conservative statesman A.J. Balfour, then in charge of the Foreign Office, assured Parliament that the coming war would remain a “white man’s war.” An anticipated Dutch reaction to the deployment of Indian troops to the Natal was part of the equation. George Hamilton, the Secretary of State for India, explained, “such an experiment would be dangerous in the extreme. It would probably raise the whole Dutch population up against us.” But British policy makers also had an eye to the Empire’s own racial politics and internal hierarchies. “If the sepoys defeated a white army they might, it was feared, ‘draw an inconvenient inference’,” Omissi notes. “They might become more aware of their potential power, or might even mutiny.”

The “white man’s war” policy did not command universal support. Some critics, with a watchful eye on Russian expansion into Central Asia, pointed out that the Indian Army would have to fight white men at some point. Others such as Lord Kitchener unsuccessfully pressed for the deployment of Indian cavalry. Adding the element of gender to a discussion already choked with its own race and class-based assumptions, he argued that Indian cavalry soldiers were “real men” who would “forget their stomachs and go for the enemy.” Meanwhile, the Government of India gleaned from monitoring the Indian vernacular presses that even while most newspapers maintained a fairly “loyalist” stance, many expressed disappointment that Indian troops had not been called upon to fight. Punjabi newspapers were especially vocal about allowing Indians a chance

101 Ibid, 216.
102 Ibid, 217.
to prove their loyalty and to show that they were just as martial as the British. Though unwilling to budge in this instance, policymakers did not want their racist wartime policies to undermine Indian loyalty to the Empire. The Boxer rebellion in 1900 offered them a chance to smooth things over to some degree. Indian soldiers made up a majority of the contingent deployed to China.

Yet the years after the war witnessed a growing consensus at levels both high and low that the decision to exclude Indian soldiers from the South African War had very nearly cost the British the loyalty of their Indian Army. In 1914, Lieutenant E.B. Howell was working in the Political Office of the Indian Civil Service when he received his orders to embark for Europe alongside the Indian Divisions deployed to Europe that autumn. Appointed Censor of Indian Mails shortly after arriving in France, Howell wrote that the Indian Army resented its exclusion from the South African War “partly from the natural keenness of all armies to put their training into practice, but much more on account of the idea which underlay that feeling, that the exclusion implied some sort of stigma of racial inferiority.” Indian soldiers already thought of themselves as equal to British troops, he added, “and this belief received an enormous stimulus from the Russo-Japanese war, the course of which was closely followed in Northern India, and its result held to prove that, given a fair chance, the Asiatic could overcome the European.”

Lt-Colonels Sir Frederick Smith and J.W.B. Merewether, employed on the staff of the Indian Corps from 1914-15, wrote of the situation in 1914: “The Indian Army had been

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103 Ibid, 221-222.
104 Ibid, 216.
105 India Officer Records [hereafter IOR] L/MIL/5/825/1, Note by Mr. E. B. Howell, Indian Civil Service, Indian Mail Censor, Boulogne.
excluded on grounds of policy from any share in the South African War. Until this
moment [August 1914] the disappointment had never been forgotten.‖

One critic of the white man’s war policy was Douglas Haig. Appointed chief of
staff in India from 1910-12, Haig accepted this position convinced that a Continental war
against Germany was likely to break out in the near future. Further concerned that
England’s security relied too heavily on the Royal Navy, he wanted to reorganize the
Indian Army to fight in Europe. He advocated for increased metropolitan power over the
Indian Army, arguing, “the existence of every part of the Empire depends on us all
sticking together, and having a homogenous Imperial Army and an Imperial Navy
controlled from one center – which must be London.”

However, for the new Viceroy of India, Lord Hardinge, the priority remained sub-continental defense, which he
maintained was best achieved if the Indian Army focused on that responsibility and
remained under the control of the Government of India. When Hardinge discovered
Haig’s secret plans for the Indian army to go to Europe under metropolitan control in the
event of a war with Germany, he denounced the plans as “useless and dangerous,”
ordered their destruction, and banned any such future project.

And yet the problem remained: Britain was ill equipped to fight a Continental war
in 1914. To be sure, when the European armies mobilized that August, the numerical
weight of land forces rested with the Triple Entente (Britain, France, and Russia). But
Britain only had two army corps immediately available at the start of the war against
Germany’s 26 active and 13 reserve corps. Germany spent much of the previous decade

107 Jack, “The Indian Army on the Western Front,” 334.
expanding its already formidable peacetime army and updating and refining the equipment available to troops. The British, meanwhile, spent that time adding very little in the way of manpower to its expeditionary force. Although Britain’s professional army was no less competent than Germany’s, the Reich’s real advantage was that it had more heavy artillery than its opponents. Each German corps possessed 144 field guns and light howitzers, supplemented by modern heavy field artillery. A French corps had 120 field guns, and a Russian corps had 108.109

When the much anticipated Continental war broke out in late July and early August 1914, the biggest question was what Britain would do. Prime Minister Edward Grey hoped that his tactic of “studied ambiguity” might help keep things localized to the Balkans. When that failed, he decided only to decide nothing, offering little of substance to the French, Russians, or Germans busily formulating their own diplomatic maneuvers.110 To be sure, Germany’s General Staff instigated a European-wide war to keep from being overtaken by Russia.111 But the decision to make the European war a world war, one that called upon global resources, rested squarely in the hands of Britain. Germany’s invasion of neutral Belgium on August 4 galvanized things in London, swinging the entire Cabinet behind intervention not for the sake of Belgian neutrality, but because of the German threat to Britain that Grey and other war hawks insisted would arise if France fell.112

110 Ibid, 158.
Having thrown itself into the brink, Britain surprised many throughout the Empire with its equivocal response to offers of troops. When the Australian government telegraphed on August 3 its willingness to send and finance an expeditionary force, the Army Council in London demurred, saying that it preferred instead to feed Australian and New Zealand troops piecemeal into British formations. The Viceroy of India, in a curious about-face, pled with Home authorities to use Indian troops in Europe. Not to do so, he said, would be seen as a slight to Indian loyalty. The Viceroy found receptive ears. It helped that Lord Kitchener, as Secretary of War, and Douglas Haig, as commander of the BEF’s I Corps, envisioned a conflict of several years, provided of course that something could be done to halt the German steamroller. At an ad hoc war council meeting at 10 Downing Street on August 6, Haig advocated for mobilizing the Indian Army. Kitchener agreed and they persuaded the council to deploy the 3rd and 7th Indian divisions – renamed the Lahore and Meerut Divisions - to Egypt for eventual use in Europe.

In India, Britain’s war machine was set in motion. At the outbreak of war, the Indian Army employed 150,000 soldiers, Indian and British. On August 7, the King issued a formal pardon for all personnel of the Indian Army who were in a state of desertion as of August 5, giving them until the start of October to turn themselves in. On August 8, the commanders of the Lahore Division and the Meerut Division received their mobilization orders. Indian soldiers and British officers made their way to base camps where they were reequipped. In Abbottabad, the 1/5th Gurkhas received news of

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114 Jack, “The Indian Army on the Western Front,” 337-338.
115 IOR L/MIL/7/17243, Army Order of August 7, 1914. By the end of the war, the Viceroy had “no figures to show how many deserters then took advantage of the King’s pardon.”
The outbreak of war on August 5. At full strength the battalion boasted twelve British officers, seventeen Gurkha officers, and 808 other ranks, but many of its British officers were on leave in England and 150 of its soldiers were on leave in Nepal. Perhaps as indication that the British had not adequately prepared the Indian Army for the eventuality of world war, the battalion was not ready to embark at Karachi until November 17. The situation was not dissimilar for the 1/4th Gurkhas, except that they boarded the SS Baroda bound for Suez and then France on August 24 despite being short nearly half of their British officers.116 The 58th Rifles, made up mostly of men from India’s Northwest Frontier, the Punjab, and Afghanistan, received its mobilization orders from the Government of India in Simla on August 12. Roughly 250 leave and furlough men rejoined the regiment on August 14 and the remainder of its reservists rejoined the following week. By early September, the regiment was on its way to Karachi along with the rest of the Meerut Division to board the ships that would take the sepoys to France.117

**COMPOSITION OF THE INDIAN CORPS, OCTOBER 1914**

**Lahore Division**

*Ferozepore Brigade*

1st Battalion Connaught Rangers  
129th Duke of Connaught’s Own Baluchis  
57th Wilde’s Rifles (Frontier Force)  
9th Bhopal Infantry  

*Jullundur Brigade*

1st Battalion Manchester Regiment

**Meerut Division**

*Dehra Dun Brigade*

1st Battalion Seaforth Highlanders  
1st Battalion 9th Gurkha Rifles  
2nd Battalion 2nd King Edward’s Own Gurkha Rifles  
6th Jat Light Infantry  

*Garhwal Brigade*

As Indians boarded ships, newspapers in France and Britain informed metropolitan audiences that colonial subjects wanted to participate in the war against Germany. On August 4, the French War Minister ordered ten West African battalions to deploy to France. As these African soldiers took their places in the front lines, French newspapers told readers eagerly awaiting some good news that these colonial troops wanted to take part in the conflict. Calling to mind select memories of France’s previous
(disastrous) war against Germany, *Le Siècle* claimed in its August 25 edition that Algerian Turcos—*le “terreur des allemands”*—“burn to avenge their fathers who fell in 1870 under Prussian bullets.”¹¹⁸ Only five days after the Lahore Division embarked at Karachi, the Secretary of State of India, Lord Crewe, spoke before the House of Lords, where he noted “the desire of the Indian people that Indian soldiers should stand side by side with their comrades of the British Army in repelling the invasion of our friends’ territory.” Knowing that African troops in the French Army had been assisting the troops in France, “it would be a disappointment to our loyal Indian fellow subjects if they were debarred from taking part.”¹¹⁹

By the time the Lahore Division reached Suez in mid September, metropolitan newspapers were issuing a steady stream of overtures to the princes and men who would serve in the expeditionary force, impressing upon readers the loyalty of the Empire. A September edition of *The Manchester Guardian* spoke at length about “India’s Splendid Rally.” Accompanied by photographs of the glittering Maharajas who were to serve with the Indian Corps, or of “typical” Indian regiments on parade before the war in India, the newspaper catalogued the many gifts offered by Indian princes to the war effort, “all alike testifying to the proud place held by the British rule and name in the esteem of every race and creed in India.”¹²⁰ *The Times* declared, “India has thrown herself enthusiastically into preparation for war, and a wave of ardent loyalty is sweeping over the country.”¹²¹ The Government of India was not shy about corroborating these reports. On September 8, the Viceroy issued a telegram announcing that the rulers of India’s

¹²¹ “India and her Army,” *The Times*, August 31, 1914.
Native States, numbering nearly 700 in all, had all rallied to the defense of the Empire, pledging their services and resources to the imperial war effort.

What began in the newspapers soon reached a fever pitch as publishers and amateur propagandists alike outdid one another in proclaiming India’s loyalty to the Empire. In a penny pamphlet on *India and the War*, Sir Ernest Trevelyan asserted that Britain’s loyal Indian troops fought on the behalf of the entire (loyal) Indian nation. Never, he wrote, “has there been an occasion when India has been more united than at the present time.” Since the outbreak of the war with Germany, “a wave of enthusiasm seems to have passed over not only the whole of the British Empire in India, but throughout Hindustan. There has not been a single note of discord. Every class and every race have shown their loyalty and their anxiety to take their share of the burdens and duties of citizens of the Empire.”

Citing the gifts and offers of assistance from every notable, from the Maharaja of Nepal to the Gaekwar of Baroda, Trevelyan insisted that only selfless devotion to the Empire motivated Britain’s colonial supporters.

Indian elites took part in assuring metropolitan audiences of Indian fidelity to the Empire. “Why is India heart and soul with Great Britain in the present crisis?” asked Bhupendranath Basu in a 1914 pamphlet. Despite some of the shortcomings of imperial rule, the war had swept away all doubt, all hesitation, and all question, so that in all of India “there was but one feeling – to stand by England in the hour of danger.” The war represented a great opportunity for India and Britain, he wrote. “The Indian princes are eager to show that they are in fact, as they have been in name, pillars of the Empire.” The people of India, “who have so thoroughly identified themselves with the British people

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“… are prepared to lay down their lives on the field.” Basu claimed that the war heralded, “an era brighter and happier than any in the past – the East and the West, India and England, marching onwards in comradeship, united in bonds forged on the field of battle and tempered in their common blood.”

Meanwhile, the Aga Khan, frequently billed as “the most influential personage in Moslem affairs in India,” delivered numerous addresses throughout Britain proclaiming India’s unwavering loyalty to the Empire. When invited to express his opinion on the war and its effect on Indian Muslims, for instance, he stated that there was no need to differentiate between the various communities within India. “All classes, religions, and sections are united in eager support of the Imperial cause, and in gratification that their martial representatives are to assist, for the first time in history, in upholding that cause on the Continent of Europe.”

Publishers also issued hastily-assembled volumes in order to provide metropolitan readers with excerpts from selected Indian newspapers. Though British readers likely knew nothing about the actual readership of these newspapers, publishers left them to infer that the newspapers accurately reflected the prevailing mood in India. In truth, the readership, like the editorship of these newspapers, more accurately reflected the mood of India’s urban, political bourgeoisie – not that of the rural peasantry that would be called upon to provide soldiers. “Behind the serried ranks of one of the finest armies in the world, there stand the multitudinous peoples of India, ready to co-operate with the Government in the defense of the Empire, which for them, means, in its ultimate

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124 As quoted in George MacMunn, ed., *India and the War* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1915), 63-64.
evolution, the complete recognition of their rights as citizens of the freest State in the world,” read *The Bengalee*, a newspaper from Calcutta.

We may have our differences with the Government … but in the presence of a common enemy, be it Germany or any other Power, we sink our differences, we forget our little quarrels and close our ranks, and offer all that we possess in defense of the great Empire, to which we are all so proud to belong, and with which the future prosperity and advancement of our people are bound up.

The *Jam-e-Jamshad*, a newspaper from Bombay, wrote:

This is the time when India should feel it to be her duty to show to the world – to England’s foes and allies alike – how greatly she is attached to her, how staunch and resolute is her devotion to her interests, how ready and willing she is to make any sacrifice she can in men and treasure, for the defense of her possessions and the assertion of her honor and dignity.125

Newspapers and imperial notables in Britain used the war and Indian troops in order to entrench the ideologies of imperial rule in India. *The Times* told its readers that the presence of Indian troops in France was itself a rebuttal of “all the foul slanders which have been circulated in the past years regarding British rule in India.” British rule in India had not been without its faults, *The Times* conceded. But it had been “honest and just and beneficial. India has known it too. In her heart she has known it, and in the day of the Empire’s trial she has proved loyal and faithful.”126 *The Manchester Guardian*, meanwhile, reflected on the pride that Englishmen must feel at seeing their hard work in India pay dividends. “The remarkable, spontaneous, and practical way in which the princes and people have shown their loyalty to the empire at a time of grave danger is a testimony to every Englishman who has assisted in the development and consolidation of

125 Quoted in MacMunn, *India and the War*, 55-62.
126 “Indian Troops in France,” *The Times*, October 2, 1914.
India.”127 King George V conveyed the very same image in his widely reprinted September 8 message to the Princes and Peoples of India. “During the past few weeks the peoples of My whole Empire at Home and Overseas have moved with one mind and purpose to confront and overthrow an unparalleled assault upon the continuity of civilization and the peace of mankind,” he began. Among such gestures and demonstrations of imperial fidelity, “nothing has moved me more than the passionate devotion to My Throne expressed both by My Indian subjects, and by the Feudatory Princes and the Ruling Chiefs of India.” He concluded, “I find in this hour of trial a full harvest and a noble fulfillment of the assurance given by you that the destinies of Great Britain and India are indissolubly linked.”128

While the deployment of Indian soldiers to Europe was a noted departure from imperial practice, this moment when “the troops of one of the world’s most ancient civilizations set foot for the first time on the shores of Europe” had historical roots: the Indian Rebellion of 1857 and the South African War of 1899-1902. For metropolitan policy makers and audiences, the arrival of the Indian Corps in France held out manifold benefits: the loyalty of the Indian Army and the solidifying of British imperial rule paramount among them. Once disembarked, the Lahore Division boarded trains for Orleans where it remained through October 18. On that day, the Division entrained again for Arques and Blendedecques where it took up in billets as it awaited deployment to the front lines. “You are the descendants of men who have been mighty rulers and great warriors for many centuries,” General Sir James Willcocks reminded the soldiers as they

128 “Message from the King-Emperor to the Princes and Peoples of India, September 8, 1914,” reprinted in MacMunn, India and the War.
prepared to take up their positions in the lines. The commander’s prophetic remarks were widely reprinted: “You will be the first Indian soldiers of the King-Emperor who will have the honour of showing Europe that the sons of India have lost none of their ancient martial instincts and are worthy of the confidence reposed in them.” But the sepoys remained embedded in a clash of empires: their experiences, and the choices they would have to make, would be determined by the policies of two empires, Britain and Germany. It is to Germany’s response to British wartime and imperial policy that we now turn.

**Weltkrieg**

On July 30 in Berlin, when it became apparent that “perfidious Albion” would intervene, the Kaiser, always one for bombast, furiously scribbled a note in the margins of a telegram from the German ambassador in St. Petersburg:

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England must … have the mask of Christian peaceableness torn publicly off her face ….
Our consuls in Turkey and India, agents etc., must fire the whole Mohammedan world to fierce rebellion against this hated, lying, conscienceless people of hagglers; for if we are to be bled to death, at least England shall lose India.
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The chief of the army’s General Staff, Helmuth von Moltke, sent a secret dispatch to the Foreign Minister, Gottlieb von Jagow three days later, noting, “England’s neutrality is of such importance to us.” In the event that England did take “a stand as our opponent,” he pressed, “attempts must be made to instigate an uprising in India.”

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130 Quoted in Fischer, *Germany’s Aims*, 121.
The First World War was a war of empires. Although Germany did not mobilize the resources of its overseas dominions to the extent that the British or French did, the policy and war aims of the German Reich nonetheless made the contest global, made it a world war. Starting in earnest in August 1914, the German Empire set about trying to foment rebellion in India. They did this in two ways. First, German diplomats secured an alliance with the Turks. Using this alliance, German and Ottoman propagandists prepared the groundwork for a pan-Islamic jihad directed at the British, French and Russian empires. Second, the German Foreign Office collected a number of Indian revolutionaries in Berlin where they formed the Indian Independence Committee. The members of this committee were to collaborate with German agents in order to spark mutiny in the ranks of the Indian Army. These revolutionaries, German and Indian alike, readily blurred any distinctions between nationalist and pan-Islamic revolution. German newspapers used the cause of Indian independence to galvanize popular support for the war from the very start.

Any discussion of Germany’s aims in the First World War must engage with the pioneering book of that very name by Fritz Fischer. In the 1960s, the German historian upset the postwar détente and the Bundesrepublik’s rapprochement with the West when he showed that Germany’s aims in the First World War bore striking similarity to those of Adolf Hitler and Germany in the Second. The German Chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, so the argument goes, seized upon the assassination of the Austro-Hungarian Archduke as the pretext to launch a long-planned war of aggression, the goal of which was German hegemony on the European continent. “The realisation of this
programme would have brought about a complete revolution in the political and
economic power-relationships in Europe,” argued Fischer. “After eliminating France as a
great power, excluding British influence from the Continent and thrusting Russia back,
Germany purposed to establish her own hegemony over Europe.”

Nazi Germany, it appeared, had not been an aberration, a deviation in German history, but the culmination
of processes tracing back to the Wilhelmine era.

Fischer’s argument provoked a flurry of further inquiry and debate, and historians
now maintain generally that the German chancellor pursued a somewhat more cautious
policy than Fischer argued, born out of an anxiety for the future of Germany’s sole ally
on the European continent, the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The survival of the Austrian
monarchy, Bethmann Hollweg and von Moltke believed, justified the risk of a European
war. It was for this reason that Germany offered its Austrian allies the now infamous
“blank check” on July 6 after the assassination of the Archduke, pledging to support
Austria in a strike against Serbia. But this check was not entirely blank. Austrian
representatives had given the impression that they intended to strike Serbia with lightning
speed, completing a punitive attack on the tiny nation in a matter of weeks. This was in
fact what Kaiser Wilhelm attempted to pressure the Habsburg Empire to do, believing –
probably correctly – that none of the Great Powers would intervene.

132 Fischer, *Germany’s Aims*, 105.
133 See John A. Moses, *The Politics of Illusion: The Fischer Controversy in German
136 Ibid, 162.
The key here, at least, is that the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand did not cause Europe to explode. The murder vanished from the headlines of most newspapers, and Europeans generally went about the normal routines of summer. If anything, Europe yawned. Only when Austria, egged on by Germany, issued an ultimatum to Serbia later on July 23 did it dawn on all of the major powers – most notably Russia - that Austria’s intentions in the Balkans went beyond those merely punitive. Still, most major newspapers had no appetite for war. The conservative *Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* wanted the conflict localized to the Balkans while the *Manchester Guardian* argued against any British intervention whatsoever. Only *The Times* argued for a war between the great powers.  

Germany’s generals, meanwhile, set things in motion for a general Continental war. They hoped to weaken France and Russia significantly at a time when, in the minds of many of Germany’s highest officials, the Reich only barely maintained supremacy in the arms race. Moltke had maintained for some time that Germany ought to launch a preventive war against Russia and France, and in the last days of July, in the words of one historian, “Politics were relegated to the position of a hand-maid charged with helping to secure an early military victory.” All that remained for the Chancellor was to begin that war under the auspices that Germany was defending itself against Russian and French aggression.  

As German armies steamrolled their way through neutral Belgium and northern France, Bethmann Hollweg set to work drafting a list of German war aims. Despite the allied counteroffensive launched by Joffre at the Marne on September 6, the Chancellor

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137 Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, 217.  
139 Fromkin, *Europe’s Last Summer*, 203; Fischer, *Germany’s Aims*, 72.
still believed that negotiations would open shortly, and he outlined his September Programme three days later. The plan called for annexations and indemnities from France. Belgium was to become a vassal state and then join a central European economic association under German leadership, designed to stabilize German economic dominance over a Mitteleuropa. Bethmann Hollweg generally tabled the matter of colonial acquisitions, though not before stating the aim of creating a contiguous Central African colonial empire.\textsuperscript{140}

Had Britain not intervened at the start of August, Germany’s aims in the First World War might have varied significantly from those of the September Program. The German Chancellor said as much on July 29 to the British Ambassador in Berlin, Edward Goschen. The Ambassador telegraphed Grey, “The Imperial Government was ready to give every assurance to the British Government provided that Great Britain remained neutral that, in the event of a victorious war, Germany aimed at no territorial acquisitions at the expense of France.”\textsuperscript{141} Moltke wrote to Jagow five days later, “Should England make her neutrality in the German-Austro-Russo-French war dependent upon Germany’s assurance ‘that she would act with moderation in case of a victory over France’ … then this assurance could be given her unconditionally and in the most binding form.” Moltke emphasized, “It is not of consequence to us to ruin France – it is only of consequence to us to vanquish her.”\textsuperscript{142}

Be that as it may, the British Empire did intervene and the German government had to contend with the world’s foremost imperial power. By 1914, Germany had lost the

\textsuperscript{140} Fischer, \textit{Germany’s Aims}, 103-105.
\textsuperscript{141} Geiss, \textit{July 1914}, document 139.
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid, document 179.
naval arms race, so there was no hope of taking on the British fleet. The shortcomings of the Schlieffen Plan were plain to see by the start of September and Moltke, after a nervous breakdown, allowed a subordinate to make the decision that ordered a general retreat to the River Aisne. Any hope for a quick victory in the West was gone. The Germans dug in. In this context, the German government decided to widen the scope of the war, to go global, and strike at its enemies where they were weakest – Africa and Asia. Accordingly, Berlin set to work on a far-reaching program of revolution directed equally at the British, French, and Russia Empires. “The promotion of independence of large parts of the British Empire, such as Egypt and India, was itself a German war aim in the wider sense,” Fischer argued, “since Germany’s rise to world power was thought to be dependent on the disintegration of the British Empire.”

Turkey was the key partner in Germany’s war aims. The Ottoman capacity to lend military assistance to Germany was limited, but Turkey could block the Dardanelles, impeding Russia’s ability to coordinate with its allies. Ottoman forces could also attack Egypt and the Suez Canal in an attempt to cut Britain’s link with India, or strike into the Caucasus to put pressure on Russia. A legitimate Turkish threat at these fronts would help Germany’s situation in France because it would prevent the Allies from concentrating their forces on the Western Front. If Germany could persuade a high Muslim authority to proclaim a jihad, or Holy War, all-the-better for Germany’s

143 Craig, Germany 1866-1945, 342.
144 Ibid, 344.
145 Strachan, To Arms, 694.
146 Fischer, Germany’s Aims, 120.
147 Lüdke, Jihad made in Germany, 32.
prospects. Britain was the world’s foremost “Muslim Power.”\textsuperscript{148} In India alone, the Muslim population exceeded 60 million. British and German officials took seriously the appeal of pan-Islam and feared the revolutionary potential of a jihad.\textsuperscript{149} For Baron Max von Oppenheim, an influential orientalist with the ear of the Kaiser, the prospects of such a coup were too tantalizing to ignore.

A great European war, especially if Turkey participates in it against England, one may certainly expect an overall revolt of the Muslims in the British colonies … In such a war, those colonies would be, along with Turkey, the most dangerous enemy of an England strong on the seas. British soldiers would be unable to invade Inner Turkey, and, in addition, England would need a large part of its navy and almost its entire army in order to keep its colonies.\textsuperscript{150}

The German government had been laying the groundwork for an alliance with Turkey since the 1890s. Timed to coincide with the 100-year anniversary of Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt, the Kaiser’s 1898 visit to Constantinople produced some of the wildest speculation in European newspapers. Was the Kaiser trying to shore up the Sultan’s rule and frustrate Russian, British, and French designs on the Ottoman domains? Was Wilhelm staking his own claim to the Ottoman inheritance?\textsuperscript{151} In October, Wilhelm visited Jerusalem clad in a Prussian field marshal’s uniform. At the site of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, he “placed himself, his army, and his Empire in the service of the Mother of Christ.”\textsuperscript{152} In Damascus, the Kaiser paid tribute to the Muslim warrior Saladin and at a banquet, saluted the current Sultan, pledging, “May the Sultan

\textsuperscript{148} Ibid, 33.
\textsuperscript{149} Ibid, 63.
\textsuperscript{150} Quoted in Strachan, \textit{To Arms}, 696.
\textsuperscript{151} Sean McMeekin, \textit{The Berlin-Beghdad Express: The Ottoman Empire and Germany’s Bid for World Power, 1898-1918} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 12.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid, 13.
and his 300 million Muslim subjects scattered across the earth, who venerate him as their Caliph, be assured that the German Kaiser will be their friend for all time.”

During the last days of July 1914, the Kaiser’s ministers worked furiously to ensure Turkish allegiance in the coming war. On August 2, they secured the signature of the Ottoman grand vizier. To be sure, the Turkish government had its own reasons for signing an alliance with the Germans at the eleventh hour and had no intention of letting Berlin bully the Ottoman Empire into a war on Europe’s timetable. On the Wilhemstrasse, however, this alliance and England’s declaration of war gave the Foreign Office the green light it required to light the fires of jihad. Germany’s agents set to work making the Holy War well in advance of its actual proclamation by the Sultan. At the epicenter of this feverish activity was Baron Max von Oppenheim, a onetime diplomat and the prodigal son of the Oppenheim banking dynasty, recalled to the Foreign Ministry on August 2. Born in 1860, Oppenheim spent his youth pouring over an illustrated edition of *The Thousand and One Nights*. After studying law briefly, he joined the civil service and embarked on his first oriental voyage at the age of twenty-three, visiting Athens, Smyrna and Constantinople, boasting that he danced with half the Greek girls in the city. In 1886, he toured the Maghreb, learning enough Arabic along the way to banter with the locals and purchase his first concubine. Independently wealthy, he resigned from the civil service in 1892 and leased a small house in an old Arab neighborhood of Cairo, having every intention to “go native.” From there he began his life’s work as an orientalist, filing

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153 Ibid, 14. Also see Fischer, *Germany’s Aims*, 121.
no fewer than 467 reports on Arab politics for the German Foreign Office between 1896 and 1909.\textsuperscript{156}

Oppenheim’s plan in 1914 was grandiose. Berlin would be the headquarters of a “qualified” global jihad – “qualified in the sense that it was to be fought against Britain, France, and Russia, not against all \textit{kafirs} (infidels).”\textsuperscript{157} Fronting his own fortune for the scheme, Oppenheim founded the \textit{Nachrichtenstelle für den Orient} (Intelligence Office for the East).\textsuperscript{158} This organization would function as a pan-Islamic clearinghouse in Berlin responsible for distributing anti-Entente pamphlets in every conceivable language. It would also coordinate the activities of agents and expeditions to the far corners of the globe intended to provide the spark – as well as guns - for revolution.\textsuperscript{159} Germany, he wrote, must arm the Muslim brotherhoods of Libya, Sudan and Yemen and support anti-colonial rebellion in French North Africa.\textsuperscript{160} India, as we might expect, was central to his plan. The baron urged the German government to incite the Habibullah Khan, the Emir of Afghanistan, to invade British India at the head of an Islamic army. This, he believed, would inspire India’s Muslim population to a revolt that would in turn, he assured Bethmann Hollweg, “force England to [agree] to peace terms favorable to us.”\textsuperscript{161}

Germany’s other key partner in fomenting revolution in India was a ready-made batch of expatriate Indians who spent several years already preparing the groundwork. Founded in 1913 in California, Ghadar was committed to the violent overthrow of the

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid, 16-23
\textsuperscript{157} Lüdke, \textit{Jihad made in Germany}, 116.
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid, 117.
\textsuperscript{159} Donald M. McKale, \textit{War by Revolution: Germany and Great Britain in the Middle East in the era of World War I} (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1998), 50-52.
\textsuperscript{160} McMeekin, \textit{The Berlin-Baghdad Express}, 91.
\textsuperscript{161} Ibid, 91.
British Empire in India. Much more than just a nationalist movement, Ghadar envisioned “a comprehensive social and economic restructuring for postcolonial India rather than a mere handover of the existing governmental institutions.” Speaking on the “Scope and aim of Indian nationalism” at the University of California in October 1912, Taraknath Das said that Young India “must demand a revolution in social ideals so that humanity and liberty would be valued over property, special privilege would not overshadow equal opportunity, and women would not be kept under subjection.” But Ghadar’s critique was global in reach, as were its activities. Speaking at the same University of California event, Har Dayal, Ghadar’s most outspoken early theorist and propagandist, declared himself an internationalist. From its wellspring in San Francisco, Ghadar activists spread across the globe where they became involved in a number of revolutionary networks: nationalist, Marxist, pan-Islamic, and combinations thereof.

The outbreak of war represented a moment when the interests of Germany and those of Ghadar aligned, and each sought out the other. Oppenheim gathered most of the Indian radicals then active in Europe to the halls of the Foreign Office and his Intelligence Office for the East where they formed the Indian National Party, or the Indian Independence Committee. These radicals included students like Virendranath Chattophadhryaya, or Dr. Abinaschchandra Bhattacharyya, both of whom were already in Europe. Other important participants who flocked to Berlin from British India were

163 Quoted in Ibid, 8.
164 Ibid, 8.
165 Political Archives of the Foreign Officer, Berlin [hereafter PAAA] R21071, Oppenheim to Wangenheim, September 16, 1914.
Champakaraman Pillai, Bhupendranath Dutt, and the aristocrat Mahendra Pratap.

Muhammed Barakatullah, Taraknath Das, Bhagwan Singh and Har Dayal also made it to Berlin and joined the Indian Independence Committee. Germans who had some prewar experience in India worked in collaboration with the Committee. This small group was directed by the missionary Ferdinand Graetsch, and including among its ranks Dr. Helmut von Glasenapp, the businessman Ernst Neuenhofer, and the missionary Paul Walter.

These men envisioned various plots in order to topple the British Empire in India, combining interchangeably the revolutionary elements of nationalism and pan-Islam. Before joining the Independence Committee in Berlin in October 1914, Dayal traveled to Constantinople where he hoped to spread propaganda among Indians in Turkey and Persia in cooperation with the Germans. His goal was to establish a “revolutionary center” in Kabul, Afghanistan. “As India is a vast plain, and England holds the seas, and the semi-independent Indian states have no modern armies, an effective military movement against England can be started only with the help of Afghanistan, a mountainous country of brave soldiers, numbering 5,000,000, who hate England & Russia,” Dayal wrote in September. “A non-official group of priests and notables, bearing letters from the Shaikh-ul-islam (Head of Islam) at Constantinople should visit Kabul and persuade the Court to attack the English forces in Beluchistan.”

Dayal made little progress over the next four weeks, frustrated, he claimed, by the Germans every step of the way. “Cooperation with German officials was impossible,” he

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166 Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia*, 73.
167 Lüdke, *Jihad made in Germany*, 119-120.
168 PAAA R21074, letter from Har Dayal, September 1914.
wrote, “for the following reasons: (1) They do not wish to spend money; (2) They do not know how to deal with men; (3) They do not trust us Indians; (4) They do not wish to encourage independent initiative on my part.” When Dayal offered that several thousand Indians could come Constantinople to partake in the work, his German contact only asked, “Can they come at their own expense?” Dayal concluded, “Political work is impossible without timely and judicious expenditure of money. What is the use of cooperating with people who do not understand this simple truth.”

Invited to visit Berlin in October, he at first turned down the offer. “It is a great privilege for us Oriental revolutionists to work in cooperation with the great and powerful German Government, but I am afraid that the ideas according to which this part of the work is being carried on will lead only to failure and my visit will not change matters.” Dayal later changed his tune, traveled to Berlin, and joined the Committee.

Oppenheim’s band of revolutionaries, German and Indian alike, agreed that the Indian Army represented a crucial lynchpin of British rule in India. Paul Walter, who contacted the Foreign Office as early as August 7, offering to take a hand in creating Hindi-language newspapers and leaflets for distribution, believed that in order to spark a rebellion in the Indian Army, Germany had to harness the memories of 1857. Born in 1866, Walter moved to India in 1903 to work as an evangelical missionary with his wife and children in tow. The great Indian Mutiny of 1857 was one of the belated consequences of the Crimean War, he believed. Had the mutiny taken place in 1854 or 1855, England surely would have lost India. As it was, in 1857, England’s hands were

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169 Ibid, letter from Har Dayal, November 2, 1914.
170 Ibid, letter from Har Dayal, October 19, 1914.
171 PAAA R21070, Walter to the Foreign Office, August 7, 1914.
free to deal with the crisis without distraction. In the uprising, “Hindus and Muslims united against the hated foreign ruler.” Although the English managed at long last to suppress the rebellion, “The course of the war revealed to the Indians the inherent military weakness of the hated foreign rulers, and this revelation kindled hope for the possibility of freedom.”

Shackled in their “boundless ignorance and poverty,” Walter argued, the people of India were unfit to act as one for their own political liberation. The same did not hold true, however, for the priests and princes of India, the landowners, merchant guilds and civil service, “and above all the native regiments.” “These priests and nobility of the sword,” he wrote, “nourish and cherish the hope of national liberation as a religious ideal.” In them, “the self-sacrificing will to freedom is still alive.” It was these men, he maintained, who could put the “deep-rooted religious prejudices of the masses” into action, just as they had in 1857 when the English issued greased cartridges to the sepoys. “The conditions necessary for an uprising are the same today as they were in 1857,” he concluded. “The tinder is there. All it needs is for us to throw the torch.”

As we might expect, the mobilization of the Indian Army and its preliminary deployment to Egypt caused a flurry of excitement in Berlin. “How many Indian troops have [the English] deployed to Egypt,” under-secretary Zimmerman wanted to know in late August, “and what languages do they speak[?]” If Oppenheim’s Intelligence Office could deliver pamphlets to these troops by way of Constantinople, he believed, the soldiers might be incited to fight against England. In Constantinople, the German Ambassador, Hans Freiherr von Wangenheim, found a willing printer and distributor. “It

172 Ibid, Paul Walter, “Indien und der Weltkrieg.”
173 Ibid.
174 Ibid, telegram from Zimmermann to Wangenheim, August 28, 1914.
is preferable that the leaflets are produced here,” he noted, “because [the leaflets] will have a greater influence on the Indians if the font and layout do not bear the mark of European work.” The ambassador added that a Turkish army officer, Halil Sami Bey, was departing for Syria shortly and was willing, for a fee, to transport the leaflets. By September, it appeared to Oppenheim that the British were massing an army of Indian soldiers in Egypt. German agents verified that the Jodhpur Lancers and two Gurkha battalions, along with the 15th, 34th and 47th Sikhs, were all in Egypt. Urdu-language pamphlets alone would not suffice, he realized, and he wired the Ambassador in Constantinople, asking him to make sure to print pamphlets in Hindi and “other important Indian languages” as well. Owing to the sectarian diversity of the Indian Army, pan-Islamic appeals would not suffice. “If the Afghan army should invade India, the British Empire in Indian would be overthrown,” stated Mahendra Pratap of the Indian Committee. “In case of an Afghan invasion of India, it will be necessary to secure the hearty cooperation of the Hindus, who may oppose it, if they look upon it as a raid of foreign Mussalman adventurers.” Pratap proposed that the German government make every effort to “convert” not just Muslim, but Hindu, Sikh, and Gurkha sepoys fighting in France so that they could send them to Kabul to join the Afghan army.

Germany’s brand of revolution, therefore, combined elements of Ghadar’s revolutionary nationalism with pan-Islamic appeals. Propaganda emanating from Oppenheim’s Intelligence Office often carried both messages simultaneously, reiterating

175 Ibid, Wangenheim to Zimmermann, August 31, 1914.
176 PAAA R21072, Oppenheim to Wangenheim, September 24, 1914.
177 PAAA R21071, Oppenheim to Wangenheim, September 15, 1914.
178 PAAA R21078, statement presented through the Indian Committee, Berlin, February 16, 1915.
“the call for Hindu-Muslim unity in the cause of Indian liberation, with the separation of religion from political and national matters,” and “an appeal to Muslims as Muslims, with their own distinct heritage and identity.”

Ghadar activists, knowing an opportunity when they saw one, flocked to Berlin at the start of the war in the hope that they might put the resources of the German Reich to work for their cause. But as Dayal determined early on, the Germans had no intention of letting Ghadar take the reins entirely. Just how Oppenheim and the Indian Independence Committee planned to persuade sepoys in France to switch sides and revolt against British rule is a topic for ensuing chapters. For now, it is enough to state that both the Foreign Office and Ghadar could agree on one thing in 1914: any successful rebellion required the participation of Indian soldiers.

Members of the Indian Independence Committee also worked at the heart of a propaganda campaign aimed at German audiences, designed to buttress support for the German war effort. Paradoxically, they did this for the same Germany that violated Belgian neutrality and intended to turn large swaths of central Europe into its own personal fiefdom. Even before Indian troops arrived in Europe, the *Hamburger Nachrichten* published an appeal written by a member of the Indian Committee.

“England is shipping Indian troops to Europe,” wrote the Committee member, “and they intend to send them to the front to fight.” For 170 years, he continued, England had forcibly taken the land, security, and the work that had once belonged to Indians. “Should our people continue merely to stand by,” he asked, “as England deploys [our people] like

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cannon fodder on European battlefields?" In September, the *Deutsche Zeitung* published the letter of one Indian student who had studied in both England and Germany. "I believe that by the end of this war," he wrote, "every man … will proclaim ‘Deutschland über alles in der Welt.’" He explained, "my sympathy for her people and my heartfelt wish for [a German] victory is rooted not just in my deep hatred for England, but the high esteem I have for the character of the German nation."  

German newspapers also countered British claims that sepoys wanted to partake in the conflict. As Indian troops arrived at Marseilles, the *Vossische Zeitung* relayed to its readership the “grotesque hymns” spouted by the English reporters who witnessed the disembarkation of the Indian Corps. Apparently, the newspaper added in utter disbelief, "Not a single Indian who set foot on French soil gave any thought to why he had been brought to the war. The motto of the troops was as it had always been for over 1,000 years: victory or death!” A grave-faced, bearded Sikh worried only that “the war might be over before he had the chance to plunge at the enemy.” A few days later, the newspaper reprinted a statement issued by Dayal’s colleagues in San Francisco. “With the most profound regret we have heard that the British Government is sending native troops to Europe to fight against Germany, who we consider to be among our truest and kindest friends,” they said. “England’s assertion that the Indians enthusiastically wanted to join in to help is completely fabricated.”

Yet German newspapers just as readily deployed racial epithets in an effort to demonize their English enemies. The *Continental Times*, an English-language newspaper

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printed in Germany for American readers, claimed that Indian soldiers were unwelcomed by the French and by French military commanders. Although France wanted England to hurry up and send more reinforcements, General Joffre reportedly scoffed at his English counterpart, “France neither wants raw levies from Canada or Australia, nor black troops from India, more picturesque than useful.”184 The Hamburger Nachrichten reminded its readers that the same “picturesque” sepoys had once terrified English audiences. It also argued that England had “betrayed” the white race by bringing Indian soldiers to Europe. As evidence, the newspaper provided an excerpt from the memoirs of an English soldier who fought to put down the 1857 rebellion, highlighting the vile racial epithets that permeated the soldier’s descriptions of Indian soldiers. Now, reported the Hamburger Nachrichten, “the English stand shoulder to shoulder with the same … ‘wild beasts’.”185

As Germany’s ambitious plans for a speedy victory in France came undone, German newspapers reassured audiences that the Sub-Continent was in open revolt and that the British were being driven back at every conceivable front. The Continental Times reported on October 2, 1914 that as Indian soldiers disembarked at Marseilles, all of Asia was rising in revolt against England and Russia. “Much has been said lately of the danger threatening England in India and Egypt but nothing has been heard yet of an organized rising in those countries,” read the lead article. News freshly in hand, however, indicated that the Emir of Afghanistan had ordered a force of 400,000 regulars under the command of his brother Nasr-Ullah-Khan to take Peshawar, “the key to India.” Another 300,000 men, commanded by the Emir’s son were supposedly marching against Russia. “Neither

184 “Now or never!” The Continental Times, December 28, 1914.  
185 “Englands Verrat an der Weissen Rasse,” Hamburger Nachrichten, November 17, 1914.
Russia nor England are able at the present moments to spare money or men for a fight in the Middle East.”\footnote{186} The \textit{Vossische Zeitung} reported in October: “The Emir of Afganistan has crossed the Indian border with an army”; “the appearance of the cruiser “Emden” off Madras sparked a riot”; there had been attempted assassinations on English officials; and “the warlike Sikhs in northern India were in open revolution.” As for the Indian troops deployed to Europe, “these troops could play a critical role in any possible rebellion.”\footnote{187} The Indian national movement had been awake since the revolution of 1857, added the \textit{Nordbayerische Zeitung}. At that time, England had almost let India slip through its hands. Now, revolution was once again possible in India.\footnote{188} After the Sultan declared the jihad on November 14, the \textit{Hamburger Nachrichten} reported that the entire Muslim world was in open revolt against its imperial oppressors.\footnote{189} Even India appeared ready to boil over, proclaimed one headline.\footnote{190}

While the German Empire could not hope to draw on global resources to the extent that its British and French rivals could, the Germans did manage to fight the war on a global scale. As this section has demonstrated, they did this by trying to harness the revolutionary potential of pan-Islam and Ghadar’s worldwide networks in order to foment rebellion in India and the Indian Army. Later chapters explore in greater detail the degree to which they succeeded in finding “converts” in the Indian Corps. Suffice to say for now, Germany’s wartime policy meant that the Indian sepoys deployed to Europe would have to navigate an inter-imperial landscape. Both Britain and Germany would try
to secure the loyalty of the sepoys in order to further their own political ends. It remains to be seen how the sepoys themselves as well as audiences in India responded to the outbreak of war and the news that Indians would fight in Europe. It is to this crucial perspective that we now turn.

**Perspectives on the War in India and the Indian Army**

Decades after the First World War, Mulk Raj Anand interviewed a number of the war’s survivors as he prepared to write *Across the Black Waters* (1939). His novel opens with the arrival of Indian soldiers at Marseilles, where throngs of exuberant French men, women and children waved and shouted “*Vivleshindou! Vivongleshindu! Vivelesallies!*” As the sepoys marched through the city,

> the long pageant, touched by the warmth of French greetings, inflamed by the exuberance of tropical hearts marched through this air, electric with the whipped-up frenzy, past churches, monuments, past rows of shuttered houses, châteaus and grassy fields, till, tired and strained with the intoxication of glory, it reached the race-course of Parc Borely where tents had been fixed by an advance party for the troops to rest.\(^{191}\)

The outbreak of war in Europe in August 1914 had profound implications for people who lived far from the actual fighting. It demonstrates that the matter of Indian “loyalty” was not a simple case of either-or. The three groups discussed here - the soldiers deployed to France in October 1914, Punjabi newspapermen, and rural peasants – exhibited a variety of responses as they tried to work an inter-imperial contest and the British imperial system to a modicum of advantage for themselves. It might also be

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fitting to say that Indians tried to work the system “to their minimum disadvantage.”

The British imperial state, after all, was infinitely better equipped to extract what it wanted from India – manpower, money, food, etc. – than Indian peasants or sepoys were to organize open resistance. Nonetheless, open resistance to British policy did occur in the early months of the war. Additionally, the nationalist press made no pretense about wanting something from the British in exchange for its support of the imperial war effort: racial equality within the Empire, and home-rule.

Towards the end of July 1914, newspapers in the Punjab showed little appetite, much less enthusiasm, for war. As things boiled over in the Balkans, the Zamindar (Lahore) saw the writing on the wall with almost prescient clarity in a July 30 editorial. War, it stated, would not be confined to Austria and Serbia,

but will be a universal war in which all the great empires of Europe will be involved; for having partitioned Asia and Africa, they have no hunting grounds left, and will now descend into the arena and hunt each other. The result of it all will be that the giant which has so far been ruining Asia will now be engaged in ruining himself; the materials of war which have so far been used to destroy Orientals will now be employed in the destruction of Europeans.

On August 4, the Panjabee (Lahore) still clung to the hope that Britain might find a way to stay out of the Continental war. “As a part of the British Empire India will hope that

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Great Britain may yet find it possible, without detriment to her vital interests, to avoid being drawn into the war.”194

Once Britain did enter the war, however, newspapers rushed to express their loyalty to the imperial cause, urging Indians to table political matters until after the conflict. “We, therefore, appeal to all our countrymen, Hindu, Muslim, Christian and Parsi, to rise to the height of the occasion and bid good-bye for the present to all agitation, however constitutional or urgent,” wrote the Observer (Lahore) on August 8.195 That same day, Akhbar-i-’Am (Lahore) urged Indians to volunteer their services to the imperial war effort and offered prayers that the Viceroy, Lord Hardinge, “may continue to trust Indians and that the British flag may continue to wave over their heads.”196 The Zamindar wrote on August 21, “We must make every effort to assist government; newspapers must drop controversy and educate people to a sense of their responsibilities; and all sedition-mongers must be driven out of the country.”197

Some smaller newspapers edited by and aimed at India’s martial races - the people and rural communities who would be called upon to fight the war - urged their readership to take up arms. The Khalsa Akhbar (Lyallpur) published a lead article on August 14, 1914 on “India and the duty of Sikhs,” in which it proclaimed, “Sikhs are ready to fight and shed their blood for the King-Emperor.”198 Later in September, the newspaper offered its readership many of the same racial stereotypes that British newspapers were feeding their readership in the metropole.

195 Ibid, Observer, August 8, 1914, p. 777.
196 Ibid, Akhbar-i-’Am, August 8, 1914, p. 794.
198 Ibid, Khalsa Akhbar, August 14, 1914, p. 808.
The Sikhs are a fighting nation and the first duty that is inculcated among them is the
duty of sacrifice. They are hardy, robust, bold and courageous. For instance, a Sikh when
asked by somebody whether he would fight, replied that he knew nothing else. To fight
for those under whose protection they live is the sole business of Sikhs, and really they
know nothing else.\textsuperscript{199}

The \textit{Loyal Gazette} (Lahore) added in an article titled, “Sikhs must now unsheathe their
swords,” that Sikhs should “turn a deaf ear” to the “scoundrels” who “denounce Sikhs for
serving in the army on a paltry pay of Rs. 10 per month” and ought to instead “request
Government to send them to the front.”\textsuperscript{200}

Many of the sepoys deployed to Europe received similar exhortations from
friends and family members: to do their duty and do what was expected of them as
representatives of the martial races. One Indian wrote to his brother, deployed to France
in late 1914: “We all hope that you will enlight the names of your ancestors by
performing your duties to the utmost satisfaction. Be always brave as your ancestors, who
were tiger-like warriors to spare their lives for the honor of Great Britain, & were called
Bahadurs. If you want to face this side again, face as Bahadur. We all pray for your
success & our daily devotion for the success of Great Britain.”\textsuperscript{201} A Rajput in India wrote
to his brother serving in France: “I am delighted to hear that you are going to the war. …
There is no room for doubt. A Rajput could not find in all his life a better opportunity
than this of displaying the virtue of his sword.”\textsuperscript{202} A Gurkha still in India wrote to a
Jemadar (Indian non-commissioned officer) in France: “Brother, this is the opportunity to

\textsuperscript{199} Ibid, \textit{Khalsa Advocate}, September 26, 1914, p. 900.
\textsuperscript{200} Ibid, \textit{Loyal Gazette}, August 16, 1914, p. 838.
\textsuperscript{201} IOR L/MIL/5/825/1, from X.Y. to his brother an Asst. Surgeon serving in France.
\textsuperscript{202} IOR L/MIL/17347, from a Rajput in India to his brother serving in France, January 9, 1915.
show your worth. To give help to your family and render aid to Government, fight well, kill your enemy and do not let him attain his object. If you die, you will make a name up to seven forefathers and will go straight to Paradise. You will become as famous as the sun. Bravo. Bravo.”^203 One woman wrote to her three brothers serving with a Mountain Battery in Egypt: “God grant victory to our King, & bring you home from your wars in safety, my brothers. War is the task of young men, to sport with death upon the field of battle, to be as a tiger & to draw the sword of valour & daring.”^204

Many of the soldiers responded in kind, writing to friends and family back home that they looked forward to proving their loyalty and prowess in battle. “We will do with zeal the work for which we have come,” wrote a Punjabi Muslim upon his arrival in France in March 1915 to a friend in a regiment in India.^205 Some soldiers, it seems, did worry that the war might be over before they reached the front. A sepoy in the 55th Rifles wrote to his brother in the 57th Rifles in France: “And please God we too shall come soon to take our part in the European war. We are all ready but we must wait for the order.”^206

Had Indians internalized the ideologies British rule? The enthusiasm of India’s political bourgeoisie and its educated middle classes was certainly striking. The Indian National Congress, dominated by political moderates, pledged its unwavering support for the imperial war effort, as did the All India Moslem League, Madras Provincial Congress, Hindus of Punjab, and the Parsee community of Bombay. India’s native princes, who still

^203 IOR L/MIL/17347, from a Gurkha at Chitral to a Jemadar in France, February 7, 1915.
^204 IOR L/MIL/5/825/1, from X.Y. to her three brothers serving with a Mountain Battery in Egypt.
^205 IOR L/MIL/17347, from a Punjabi Muslim, serving in France, to a friend in a regiment in India, March 8, 1915.
^206 IOR L/MIL/5/825/1, from a sepoy in the 55th Rifles to his brother in the 57th Rifles.
ruled about one-third of India in partnership with the Raj, enthusiastically pledged troops, money, and other supplies to the war effort.\textsuperscript{207} Letters imploring soldiers to do their duty abound in the reports of the censor of Indian mail. David Omissi has observed that many Indian soldiers fought, above all, to gain or preserve their honor, reputation, or prestige.\textsuperscript{208} For example, a soldier of the 33\textsuperscript{rd} Cavalry stationed in Poona wrote to his brother in the 26\textsuperscript{th} Cavalry serving in France:

> And be ever mindful altogether to be true to the salt of our Government. May God order all for the best. I hope that we shall gain a speedy victory & shall soon come home again.

> And I am profoundly grateful that this opportunity has come to us of proving our loyalty to our Government, whose praise is beyond telling.\textsuperscript{209}

A clerk in India wrote to a Subedar-Major of a Garhwal battalion serving in France:

> I hope you have by now joined the front line & you are trying your best to show great valour in the battlefield in the hope of getting V.C.. This is the only occasion when one could show his bravery & obtain titles & good name. Being Subedar-Major of the Battalion you should try to give courage to everybody in the field & devote your heart & soul for the loyalty of Government.\textsuperscript{210}

Recruiting officers in the Punjab, meanwhile, reported no difficulties in obtaining manpower through the end of 1914. “Rather like Europe during the first months of the war,” writes Tan Tai-Yong, “the initial response of the Punjab to early recruitment drives was characterized by enthusiasm.”\textsuperscript{211}

\textsuperscript{207} Merewether and Smith, \textit{Indian Corps}, 4-6.
\textsuperscript{208} Omissi, \textit{Indian Voices}, 12.
\textsuperscript{209} IOR L/MIL/5/825/1, from the armorer of the 33\textsuperscript{rd} Cavalry writing from Poona to his brother in the 26\textsuperscript{th} Cavalry serving in France.
\textsuperscript{210} IOR L/MIL/5/825/1, from a clerk to a Subedar-Major of a Garhwal battalion serving in France.
\textsuperscript{211} Tan Tai-Yong, “An Imperial Home-Front,” 378.
We should take pause, however, before corroborating such claims, which seem to echo editorials like those found in the *Times* asserting that Indians were “determined to help win their Emperor’s battles or die.” Quite possibly, some sepoys and Indian audiences had internalized the discourse about martial races. Military service, after all, often functions as a vehicle for the construction of group identity. But given that the financial solvency of India’s “martial” communities depended on their “favored” status within the Empire, it is also likely that these groups supported the war in order to secure that position. Indeed, the Lieutenant Governor of the Punjab, Michael O’Dwyer, wrote after the war that Sikhs “remained staunch and loyal” because the government offered specials pensions and reduced land taxes for those who offered active assistance. “These had a wonderful effect in stimulating popular co-operation,” he wrote.\(^{212}\) In March 1915, O’Dwyer met with Sikh notables and requested their assistance in capturing Ghadar rebels. He told them, “the movement was bringing the Sikhs as a whole into discredit, and their interests as well as their honour were involved.”

> All were eager and sincere in offering to me their own co-operation and all the influence at their command; some were anxious to go much further in the way of drastic measures than I was.\(^{213}\)

British officials in India made no secret of co-opting the support of India’s peasantry with various monetary incentives.

> Indeed, with the outbreak of war, people in India faced an economic crisis similar to that which hit Europe’s urban economies.\(^{214}\) Workers in the cities faced mass layoffs.

The *Bijli* (Lahore) reported on September 9:

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\(^{213}\) Ibid, 204.
… owing to the war many workshops and factories have suddenly stopped work. In consequence a large number of workmen have been thrown out of employment, some of whom, having large families, have been driven to desperation by pangs of hunger and starvation. The question now arises what these people will do?²¹⁵

Spikes in unemployment in August and September 1914 coincided with spikes in the prices of food and other basic necessities. The Akhbar-i-ʿAm reported on September 12, “Grain dealers are utilising the war for their own selfish ends. They have raised the price of wheat and the poorer classes are suffering greatly in consequence of their action.”²¹⁶ The Jhang Sial (Lahore) wrote on September 14 that the price of food increased daily. “Food stuffs have become exceedingly expensive, - the price of flour being 8 seers to the rupee. This is causing great distress among the poorer classes.”²¹⁷ Before long, people began to panic, and the Vakil (Amritsar) warned of a “famine looming over India.”²¹⁸

This economic insecurity likely drove many into the ranks of the Indian Army. In 1914, the British Home Government asked for 21,000 combatant recruits in the last four months of the year from India. India raised 28,000, of whom 14,000 came from the Punjab, 3,000 from Nepal, 3,000 from the Frontier and trans-Frontier, and 8,000 from the rest of India.²¹⁹ In the Punjab, Lieutenant Governor O’Dwyer wrote,

²¹⁴ Ferguson, The Pity of War, 198. The most immediate effect of the war on urban economies was to plunge them into recession. In London, the unemployment rate for workers covered by national insurance rose from seven to 10 percent in the first month of the war. Absent the regimen of conscription found everywhere on the Continent, Britain relied on volunteers. The peak of enlistment in Britain coincided with the peak of unemployment caused by the outbreak of the war and the subsequent financial and commercial crisis.
²¹⁶ Ibid, Akhbar-i-ʿAm, September 12, 1914, p. 867.
²¹⁷ Ibid, Jhang Sial, September 14, 1914, p. 867.
²¹⁹ O’Dwyer, India as I Knew it, 216.
Finally, and this was the most effective of all inducements to the Punjab peasant, directly war broke out, I put at the disposal of the Commander-in-Chief one hundred and eighty thousand acres of valuable canal-irrigated land for allotment later to Indian officers and men who had served with special distinction in the field. I also set aside some fifteen thousand acres for reward-grants to those who gave most effective help in raising recruits.  

It seems likely that Sikhs, Punjabi Muslims, and other peoples actively supported the government to protect what little they had.

Despite the economic condition in India in late 1914, there were plenty of people who did not want to fight. In October, when blacksmiths and carpenters in Gujranwala heard a rumor that the government intended to send them to the war, they fled and went into hiding. Indeed, the same economic consideration that likely drove many into the ranks of the Indian Army may have kept some people out of uniform. One Pathan man wrote to his brother in the 58th Rifles, “We were all very angry with you, because you paid no heed to our plight but went off with the regiment. If I had not come home matters would have gone ill with us. But never mind about that now. Do your duty well.”

A number of rumors circulating through the rural countryside further reveal that many Indians did not greet the outbreak of war with enthusiasm, but with profound anxiety for their security and the safety of any would-be soldiers. In late September, the Dipak (Lahore) reported, “Some illiterate people say that the Germans have reached Karachi and will in a few days attack Multan.” The Vakil (Amritsar) reported later in October that many rumors were afloat in the country. Among those, it reported, “That the

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220 Ibid, 216.
221 IOR L/R/5/195, Zamindar, October 12, 1914, p. 929.
222 IOR/L/MIL/5/825/1, from a Pathan to his brother in the 58th Rifles.
standard of rebellion has been raised in Egypt against the English,” and, “That the Indian Army in Egypt has been destroyed.”

Before the Indian Corps had even disembarked at Marseilles, another rumor held that the German had captured 12,000 Sikh soldiers. The Germans then disgraced the sepoys by shaving their heads.

Additionally, soldiers who did express enthusiasm for the war hoped for a quick victory and a speedy return home – not death or glory. A soldier recently arrived in France wrote to his brother in the Punjab: “I pray daily morning & evening that God will give the victory to our Government, & that we may return to our homes in safety honor & renown.”

Another Indian wrote to his brother serving in the 15th Lancers in France: “This is my prayer, if the God of mercy will accept it, that our noble King the Emperor of India may shortly be victorious & that you all may return home safe & sound.”

Indeed, there was a significant gap between the kind of war Indians expected and the war they actually found in France. Some newspapers, like Zamindar, complained about the lack of war news. “The military authorities refuse to publish even the most trifling details about the war,” read its September 4 edition. “This strict censorship is maintained not only in India but in Europe generally.” If Indians were enthusiastic about the war, it is because they did not expect the nightmare that awaited the sepoys at the Western Front.

If any single group was enthusiastic about the war, it was India’s urban middle class. Punjab’s political bourgeoisie made it clear that they wanted Britain to mobilize the Indian Army and deploy it to Europe. The Tribune wrote on August 12, “If any troops are

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225 Ibid, Naurattan, October 1, 1914, p. 947.
226 IOR/L/MIL/5/825/1, from a soldier to his brother in the Punjab.
227 IOR/L/MIL/5/825/1, from X.Y. to his brother in the 15th Lancers in France.
to leave this country for active warfare in Europe, let Indian as well as British soldiers be
sent without distinction of race and creed to serve side by side in defence of our united
cause.”

If Indian troops are sent on these terms, there will be unbounded enthusiasm in India. Let
there be no question of ‘prestige’ or the inadvisability of employing brown against white
soldiers. Prestige must be based on conduct and on no other consideration. France, we
believe, would not refrain from employing her Algerian troops against a European
enemy. India expects at least as much from Great Britain.229

Zamindar (Lahore) wrote on September 16, referring to the widespread demonstrations of
support in India, “It is a misfortune … that Indians have been unable to prove their
loyalty in a practical manner. We feel confident that, had Indians been put in the field at
the very outset of the war, Germany would have been crushed by this time.”230

Newspapers in the Punjab supported the war and the Indian Army’s involvement
in it precisely because it could improve India’s status within the Empire. The Zamindar
noted on August 20 that India was not anxious to lose the protection of the British
Government. “However we hope that we shall benefit by this War by such favours as the
repeal of the Press Act and other distasteful measures.”231 The Panjabee wrote on
September 5, “The employment of Indian troops in the present war is to be commended
principally for the reason that it is a step towards the eventual obliteration of existing
racial prejudice, so essential to India’s self-fulfillment as a nation and an integral part of
the Empire.”232 Zamindar took things even a step further. “We are convinced that self-
government will be granted to this country – even if it be compensation for the services

229 Ibid, Tribune, August 12, 1914, p. 796.
231 Ibid, Zamindar, August 20, 1914, p. 810.
of Indians during the war.” Careful review of the Punjabi press reveals that the support of India’s political bourgeoisie owed more to shrewd political calculation than undying love for the Empire.

India’s middle classes clamored for the opportunity to volunteer for military service. In its September 1 issue, Jhang Sial (Lahore) stated that the deployment of Indian troops to Europe had removed all “colour distinctions” within the British Empire. “We have not yet, however, completely realized our wish. We desire every Indian to play his part in the present crisis. Volunteers should be raised who could be sent abroad for service if the occasion arose.” The Tribune stated that same day, “Indian soldiers are sure to stand side by side with English and French soldiers and fight with valour becoming the noble sons of India against the enemies of the Empire. What the Indians, in military or civil employment, want is opportunity, equal and fair. We are sure that the German soldiers will find more than their match in the Indian.” The Prabhat (Lahore) wrote in its August 29, 1914 edition that educated Indians would be a better match against Germans than the sons of illiterate peasants:

It must be remembered that Indians are divided into two distinct classes – the educated and the illiterate. To pit the latter against German soldiers who are fighting with a spirit of patriotism is ridiculous. What Government should do is to enlist the services of educated Indians. Such men have a conception of the meaning of patriotism and would thus be fit to meet Germans in the battlefield.

Punjab’s urban middle classes pinned their goals of racial equality and national self-determination to the performance of the sepoys deployed to Europe.

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234 Ibid, Jhang Sial, September 1, 1914, p. 838.
235 Ibid, Tribune, September 1, 1914, p. 839.
236 Ibid, Prabhat, August 29, 1914, p. 839.
Turkey’s looming entry into the war also caused considerable anxiety among India’s Muslim communities. The Prabhat (Lahore) speculated on October 24 what might transpire if Turkey did enter the war.

Turkey’s participation in the war will undoubtedly be followed by trouble in Egypt and Tripoli. The war spirit will eventually spread throughout the Muslim World. Persia will lose no time in shaking off the yoke of Russia and England. Frontier Pathans will immediately fall on India. And then we shall have to see whether Indian Muhammadans will pray in their mosques for the victory of the Union Jack! The wave of Pan-Islamism in Asia is more powerful than the Pan-Slavism of Europe. Turkey’s entry into the war will be the signal for a general upheaval of the Islamic world.\(^{237}\)

When Turkey did at last enter the war, the Observer wrote on November 4,

The one big contingency, which the Muslims of India had long been dreading and to avert which they had been praying with all the sincerity of their convictions, has at last happened. Turkey, despite the entreaties of the whole Muslim world to stand aloof and against her own best interests, has succumbed to the chauvinistic influences which were ruling her and has decided to plunge her people into a blood war.\(^{238}\)

British authorities hurried to minimize any impact Turkey’s declaration of war might have on India’s Muslim community. The Viceroy distributed a proclamation made by the British Government regarding the immunity of the Holy Places of Islam in Arabia and other places from attack or molestation by Britain or its allies. That November, he telegraphed the Secretary of State for India, reassuring him of the loyalty of India. “His Highness the Aga Khan has given a complete statement of his attitude, which has been published in India, and I am daily receiving telegrams from his followers giving assurances of their entire accord with those views, and of their devotion to the British

\(^{237}\) Ibid, Prabhat, October 24, 1914, p. 988.  
\(^{238}\) Ibid, Observer, November 4, 1914, p. 989.
Just as they had done in August 1914, the princes of India outdid one another in opulent displays of their fidelity to the British Empire. The Nizam of Hyderabad, Begum of Bhopal, Nawab of Rampur, and Nawab of Tonk impressed upon all Muslims that it was their “bounden duty at this critical juncture to adhere firmly to their old and tried loyalty to the British government.” The Begum of Bhopal, for instance, in an address to her people in a public durbar on November 6, explained how Great Britain had been unwillingly drawn into the war in order to protect a small state against “the rapacity of Germany,” and expressed her hope that all Muslims “will show that they are as staunch as ever in their loyalty, and will not allow themselves to be led away by hostile influences.” According to the Viceroy’s account of the address, Her Highness also called attention to the “many occasions upon which Great Britain had shown herself a true friend to the Ottoman Empire and concluded with a declaration that she would always remain loyal to the treaties which exist between the Bhopal Durbar and the British Government seeing that these treaties were binding upon her not only as a Ruling Chief under the protection of the British Government but also as a follower of Islam, which enjoins upon all its followers the sanctity of a promise.”

As India’s Ruling Princes played their part in supporting the Imperial relationship, the Viceroy also assured London that “the expressions of public feeling among Indian Mahomedans in general are equally striking.” Resolutions poured in to Simla from throughout India assuring the Government of the “steadfast loyalty” of Indian Muslims in the present crisis. The All Indian Moslem League, the Bombay Presidency Moslem League, the United Provinces Moslem League, the Punjab Moslem League, and Behar

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239 TNA CO 323/638, War with Turkey, Moslem attitudes in India.
240 Ibid.
Provincial Moslem League, the All India Sufi Conference, all promised their unwavering commitment to British rule. The All India Moslem League, the Viceroy assured, had resolved that the “participation of Turkey in the present war does not and cannot affect that [Muslim] loyalty in the least degree and the Council is confident that no Mussalman in India will swerve a hairs breadth from his paramount duty to his Sovereign.”

At the censor’s office in France, Howell contented himself that the Turkish-German alliance would have no significant impact on the troops in Europe. One letter he intercepted from a Muslim officer serving in France to his brother in India in late 1914 read: “What better occasion can I find than this to prove the loyalty of my family to the British Government? Turkey, it is true, is a Muhammadan power, but what has it to do with us? Turkey is nothing at all to us.” Letters from India to the troops in Europe seemed equally reassuring. A father wrote to his son, a rifleman in a Garhwal Battalion serving in France: “From the news received from the west it appears that the Turks have got ready an army near the Suez Canal to attack our Government. Our Muhammadan brothers however are quite unmoved & all is quiet here.”

If the soldiers in Europe seemed unmoved for the time being, events on the far side of the globe proved much more alarming. On November 20, soldiers belonging to the 130th Baluchis were preparing to embark at Bombay. Owing to recent reports that Pathans of the 20th Infantry fighting in the Persian Gulf had deserted and shown a disinclination to fight Arabs and Turks, the destination of the Baluchis had been changed at the last minute from Force D (Mesopotamia) to Force B (East Africa). The 130th had

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241 Ibid.
242 IOR L/MIL/17347, from a Muslim officer serving in France to his brother.
243 IOR L/MIL/5/825/1, from a man from Garhwal to his son in a Garhwal battalion serving in France.
already experienced an incident of insubordination almost immediately after the outbreak of the war. Many soldiers deserted when the regiment was ordered on service, and on August 14, 79 Afghan Mahsuds of the regiment were convicted by court-martial and imprisoned for insubordination resulting from disaffection over their Subadar not being promoted to Subadar Major. British authorities, still desperate for bodies in a rapidly expanding war, believed that the remaining soldiers could be relied on to fight for the Empire. As the soldiers of the regiment boarded the ship, an Afghan sepoy killed a British Major with his bayonet.\textsuperscript{244}

Embarkation for the war in East Africa stopped almost immediately. The murderer was quickly tried and executed, and other Mahsud tribesmen in the regiment were disarmed and jailed on suspicion of complicity. “It was considered politically inexpedient to allow them to return to Waziristan during the war,” the Viceroy wrote in his report on the incident. The state of affairs there was already unsatisfactory, he continued, and authorities ultimately decided to keep the men confined for the duration of the war. The remainder of the regiment deployed instead to Rangoon, where it remained until January 1915 when it received orders to embark again for Mombasa on the 25\textsuperscript{th}. On January 19, however, authorities received word that the Pathans would refuse to embark on the pretext “that there were now many people dependent on them.” The following evening, three companies of Pathans were made prisoners without resistance. Two of the suspected ringleaders were quickly tried and sentenced to death while the remaining 202 were sentenced to various forms of transportation.

\textsuperscript{244} IOR L/MIL/7/18846, telegram from the Viceroy, January 29, 1915.
At last, on January 26, the 447 remaining men of the regiment left Rangoon for East Africa, but the Viceroy remained troubled by the regiment’s difficulties of the previous months. “There is no doubt that there is a strong disinclination among certain classes of Pathans especially Afridis to fight against the Turks or their allies,” he wrote in late January.\(^{245}\) The Secretary of State for India replied to the Viceroy’s telegram, asking that he be kept informed of such incidents, adding that it was important to keep abreast “of the temper of the Native Army” and especially of its Muslim companies. “Please wire if desertions are abnormal amongst Pathans generally or only in certain regiments,” he added.\(^{246}\)

News of the 130\(^{th}\) Baluchis reached the Indian soldiers serving in France in early 1915. One Pathan Afridi at Kohat wrote to a friend serving in the 129\(^{th}\) Baluchis in mid-February:

(Five names) have taken an oath with me. (The nature of the oath is not explained) -. We are very anxious. The 130\(^{th}\) refused to go to the war. Subedar-Major Sultan Mir has been court martialled, and all the Afridi sepoys have been put into custody. Ninety sepoys are in custody. But our maliks have gone to Peshawar to make a representation.\(^{247}\)

A Pathan at Peshawar wrote similarly to a friend in the 129\(^{th}\) in France:

As for the 130\(^{th}\) Baluchis, the regiment of which two companies have gone from Rangoon to the Andamans, one Jemadar and one Hawaldar have been shot. There is great excitement about this in Peshawar. Among the Afridi people there is a hope that their object with regard to them may be effected. That hope is this, that they may come back.

\(^{245}\) Ibid.  
\(^{246}\) IOR L/MIL/7/18846, telegram from the Secretary of State of India to the Viceroy, February 1, 1915.  
\(^{247}\) IOR L/MIL/17347, from a Pathan Afridi at Kohat to a friend in the 129\(^{th}\), February 14, 1915.
and be released, because the ‘Lord Sahib of Peshawar’ has assented to this. Be not anxious or distressed or troubled. For God will bring everything to rights.\textsuperscript{248}

In April, E.B. Howell summed up that among the Pathans, “there is a good deal of natural curiosity as to what is happening on the frontier, and the Afridis in particular are much concerned to know the truth of what has happened to their fellow tribesmen in the 130\textsuperscript{th}.\textsuperscript{249}

Another mutiny occurred on the afternoon of February 15 when some 400 Rajput Muslims belonging to the right wing of the 5\textsuperscript{th} Light Infantry stationed at Alexandra Barracks, about five miles outside Singapore, killed their commanding officers. One party of the soldiers then went to a compound three miles away at Tanglin where nearly 300 German prisoners were confined, guarded by British troops belonging to the Singapore Volunteers and Malay troops belonging to the Sultan of Johore. The mutineers easily overwhelmed the guard, and then opened the gates to the compound, handing out rifles and ammunition to the German prisoners. Only 17 of the 300 German prisoners took the opportunity to escape. A party of 11 crossed in canoes to the nearby Dutch-controlled Carimon Islands. “They were furnished with plenty of money,” a secret memo reported, “and the canoes were ready for them.”\textsuperscript{250} Meanwhile, a second party of mutineers attempted to surprise a detachment of 80 British soldiers of the Malay States Volunteer Rifles at another camp nearby. The Volunteers held out through the night, and were rescued the following day by a heterogeneous force made up of the Singapore

\textsuperscript{248} IOR L/MIL/17347, from a Pathan at Peshawar to a friend in the 129\textsuperscript{th}, February 13, 1915.
\textsuperscript{249} IOR L/MIL/17347.
\textsuperscript{250} TNA ADM 1/8419/112, secret letter from the Secretary of the Admiralty in Singapore, February 27, 1915.
Volunteers and armed civilians. With their attack checked, the mutinous soldiers of the 5th scattered over the island in large and small parties.

Authorities in Singapore scrambled to find reinforcements. The Secretary of the Straits Settlement wired the French ship *Montcalm*, which had left Singapore for Colombo the previous day. The ship turned around and returned to Singapore at full speed, arriving on the morning of February 17. A number of special constables were hastily thrown together and 160 Japanese civilians were organized and armed under the direction of the Japanese Consul. The Japanese government, meanwhile, hurriedly sent two more ships, the *Tsushima* and the *Otowa* to help in quelling the mutiny. Not to be outdone, Russian authorities ordered the ship *Orel* to make strait for Singapore with a supply of two officers and 40 men. On February 20, 600 men of the 4th King’s Shropshire Light Infantry arrived from Rangoon.

Interrogations of those who had been captured began to shed some light on the true causes of the mutiny. The Secretary of the Straits Settlements first believed “that jealousy concerning promotions is the primary reason.” Further investigation revealed that the soldiers had been motivated by “religious excitement” owing to the “indiscrete action” of a native officer in religious matters. One mutineer, Jellal Khan, stated to his captors that although the soldiers had fought previously against Moslems, “the Malvi told them from Mosque this war was unlike” others as sepoys were now being asked to fight against the “head” of their religion, the Sultan in Istanbul. The Sepoy also stated “now Germans are allies of Turk the Moslem Indians in France though they may not fight against us they will not fight for us in Asia.” When asked how he knew this, Khan replied, “We get letters from Indian and know feelings.” Asked if he knew who the Aga
Khan was, he said that he did not, adding for emphasis, “I know my hour has struck but this is truth.”\textsuperscript{251} Four more mutineers, captured on February 28, revealed that at the time of the mutiny, the soldiers believed they were about to be sent to fight against the Turks in Egypt.

Despite efforts to suppress news of the mutiny, the Governor of Hong Kong informed the Colonial Office on February 20 that news of the mutiny had reached Canton. “I venture to suggest therefore that to prevent circulation of exaggerated rumors it would be well to issue communiqué to the press here concerning occurrence.”\textsuperscript{252} The Secretary of State for the Colonies instructed the Governor of Hong Kong three days later to announce that “owing to some jealousy and dissatisfaction concerning recent promotions a portion of the 5\textsuperscript{th} Light Infantry refused to obey orders, causing serious riot which local and neighbouring forces assisted in quelling.” The official press release read on February 23:

News has been received from Singapore that owing to some jealousy and dissatisfaction concerning recent promotions a portion of the 5\textsuperscript{th} Light Infantry refused to obey orders, causing a serious riot which the local and neighboring forces, with a detachment of the 36\textsuperscript{th} Sikhs, assisted the authorities in quelling. Assistance was also rendered by landing parties from British and Allied ships.

Clearly, news of the outbreak of war in Europe generated a wide variety of responses in India and among Indian troops. Some actively supported the war, albeit not for the reasons British metropolitan audiences read about in newspapers and penny propaganda. Inflation, rising unemployment and various economic incentives compelled

\textsuperscript{251} TNA ADM 1/8419/112, telegram from the Governor of the Straits Settlement to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, received February 20, 1915.
\textsuperscript{252} TNA ADM 1/8419/112, telegram from the Governor of Hong Kong to the Colonial Office, February 20, 1915.
many, concerned above all with protecting the little they had, to support the war effort. Others avoided military service altogether. Some mutinied to avoid deployment. Such responses reveal the extent to which “enthusiasm” mischaracterizes the general mood in India upon learning about the war and the Turkish-German alliance.

**Conclusion**

The outbreak of the First World War and the arrival of Indian sepoys in Europe in late 1914 was a complex and layered imperial moment: its meaning was contested within and beyond the realm of the British Empire, informing decisions and shaping the contexts in which people acted on opposite sides of the globe. In England, government and military authorities readily acknowledged that they required bodies on the Western Front just as fast as they could get them. Previous experience taught them that the Indian Army, made up of the “martial races,” resented its exclusion from the South African War. They made the decision to deploy sepoys to Europe for two reasons: to secure the front and to secure the loyalty of India. As the soldiers made their way halfway around the world, metropolitan newspapers and propaganda hailed the moment and, in so doing, entrenched the ideologies of imperial rule. But imperial Germany also had a hand in making the war global. Intent of spreading revolution in British India and the Indian Army, Germany secured two important alliances. One was with the Ottomans, with whom they collaborated on spreading pan-Islamic ideas and jihad. The other was with Ghadar revolutionaries, who prepared a variety of programs intended to “convert” the sepoys once they arrived in Europe. In India, the outbreak of war and the mobilization of the Indian Army elicited much excitement. It would be incorrect, however, to characterize
that excitement as enthusiasm. Peasants from rural Punjab and newspapermen in the major urban centers saw the outbreak of war instead as an opportunity to work the British Empire and its clash with Germany to some modicum of advantage. Others, seeing little to be gained by supporting the British, chose to risk everything by mutinying. Be that as it may, by mid-October 1914, the Indian Corps was ready to take up positions at the front in the unfolding war of empires. For those behind the lines, all that remained was to wait for news of the fighting in Europe. It is to this topic that we now turn.
Chapter Two

Front

In late 1916, the mother of an Indian cavalry soldier serving in France wrote to her son. Her letter, postmarked from Jhelum, in the Punjab, suggests that soldiers fought for a host of reasons beyond a desire to “win their King-Emperor’s battles or die.”

I shall be well pleased with you, if you do not turn your back on the enemy, so that our neighbors may not taunt us. I have no other son to send to the war, therefore on no account whatever turn your back on the enemy. Rather make a name for yourself, and since you have eaten the Sircar’s salt, discharge your duty faithfully.\(^\text{253}\)

Between 1914-18, Indian soldiers fought on the Western Front alongside millions of other men on behalf of the British Empire. The battle lines in France and Belgium were the epicenter of a clash of empires and that Indians deployed to Europe played no small part in determining the fate of the British Empire in India. As sepoys engaged in the gruesome work of securing the front, propaganda reinforced the ideologies and racial hierarchies of imperial rule for audiences in Europe and South Asia. For the German Reich and its Ghadar allies, trenches housing Indians represented the recruiting grounds for potential revolutionaries. Thus, the German Empire actively courted the loyalty of the Indian troops opposite German \textit{Frontschwein}. The Indian soldiers recognized that they were thoroughly enmeshed in the countercurrents of two global empires. Responding to this, and the sheer terror of the twentieth century’s first truly industrial war, some sepoys

\(^{253}\) TNA FO 383/288, supplementary letters forwarded by the Censor, Indian Mails, in France, January 10, 1917.
managed to put the rivalry of the European powers to a modicum of advantage for
themselves.

This chapter is broken into three parts. First, it demonstrates that Indian sepoys
were central to the military situation and British strategy on the Western Front through
the close of 1915. Most sepoys remained loyal to the Empire’s military hierarchy, going
over the top every time their commanders ordered them to do so. Yet a small number
found ways to actively and openly resist British policy, guided by a desire to salvage
something from the horror of the Western Front. This chapter then examines propaganda
about Indian soldiers intended for audiences in England and Germany. Although
published on opposite sides of no-man’s-land, British and German propaganda called
upon a shared repertoire of racial stereotypes about Indian soldiers in order to galvanize
popular support for the war. In so doing, both reinforced the ideologies underpinning
European imperial rule. Finally, this chapter considers representations of Indian soldiers
and of the war in Europe produced by and for audiences in India. The British and the
Germans hoped that the presence of Indians in Europe might further their own ends in
South Asia. Indian soldiers and Punjabi newspapers had their own agendas. Comparison
reveals the extent to which the First World War and the deployment of Indian troops to
Europe had the potential to solidify, or upend entirely, the structures and ideologies of
British rule in India.

**Fighting the King-Emperor’s Battles**

In Mulk Raj Anand’s *Across the Black Waters*, sepoy Lal Singh and the soldiers of the
69th Rifles arrive at the front just in time for the First Battle of Ypres in late October
1914. His description of the men descending for the first time into the slimy, pockmark network of British trenches stands out as some of the best of First World War writing. “A hail of lead” greeted the men as they advanced into the communication trenches. “The sepoys tried to keep their backs bent and their heads lifted,” as they had been told to do. All around, groups of British soldiers stood in the trenches behind sandbags, firing the occasional shot with their rifles at an unseen enemy. Somewhere in the distance, heavy artillery belched, one after the other, “but neither the earth, nor the sky, nor the air seemed to be any different after the thunder had died down,” as if the guns were booming “in some unknown world, far away.”

The men of the Anand’s 69th Rifles became better acquainted with the devastating effects of German heavy artillery soon enough. Indeed, if there was anything universal about the experience of the Western Front, it was that the encounter between human flesh and high explosive was always a one-sided affair. The Western Front consumed human lives and mangled human bodies at an unprecedented rate, and in manners previously unimagined. This section demonstrates that Indian soldiers, present on the Western Front through the armistice, were central to British military strategy in the early years of the war. In 1914, the British Empire was desperate for bodies on the Western Front. Owing to the misguided strategies of the Allies, Indian soldiers suffered horrendous casualties, on par with nothing they had experienced before. The majority of Indian soldiers remained loyal to the Empire’s military hierarchy. Other openly resisted British policy. In so doing, they revealed that they were not mere pawns in a murderous clash of empires.

254 Anand, Across the Black Waters, 87-90.
During the First World War, industrialized European societies came face-to-face for the first time with their own killing potential. Between 1817, when Germany defeated France and proclaimed the unification of the Reich, and 1914, there had not been a single war in Europe. Instead, the only fighting experienced by British, French and German soldiers took place overseas in colonial frontiers.255 In these so-called “small wars,” soldiers first deployed many of the killing technologies and methods made possible by the second wave of industrialization in the late-nineteenth century. Europeans armed with machineguns for the first time butchered African peoples wholesale.256 In 1914, no European soldier could have been unaware of the murderous capacity of the weapons he carried to war.257 And yet the reality of industrial warfare still caught many by surprise. “The merry, fresh war which we were all looking forward to for years has turned out to be quite different from what we thought!” wrote a cavalry officer in December 1914. What was happening in France was not war, but the “murder of troops by machines.”258

Indian soldiers descended for the first time into the dank and water-logged trenches of the Western Front in late October 1914 and participated in nearly every major battle thereafter. During the final three months of 1914, the Indian Corps fought at Ypres, Festubert and Givenchy. After enjoying a brief respite in January, heavy fighting resumed in March 1915 at Neuve Chapelle, where the Indian Corps made up more than half of the attacking force. By that time, both sides had dug in, creating a 475 mile long network of trenches, barbed wire, bunkers, saps, and machinegun nests that snaked its way from the

257 Kramer, Dynamic of Destruction, 79.
258 Quoted in ibid, 38.
Belgian coast all the way to the Swiss border. Combined British and French strategy from that year forward was focused on one thing: driving the Germans out of Belgium and France. The preliminary offensive at Neuve Chapelle failed to produce the breakthrough, so the Indian Corps went back to work at Second Ypres in April, Festubert again in May, Loos in September. In late November, the Indian infantry withdrew from the frontlines for good and redeployed to theaters in the Middle East. Indian cavalry troopers remained behind, however. They played a part at the disastrous battle of the Somme in 1916. Thereafter, dismounted Indian cavalrymen continued to serve in the regular frontline rotation until the end of the war. “We go regularly into the trenches in turn,” wrote one cavalryman in December 1916.

Although the British Empire deployed the bulk of its Indian soldiers to the Middle East, winning the war in France was the key to winning the war. The German Chancellor’s September Program called vaguely for a German Empire in Africa, but all that would have been a moot point if Germany’s armies in Europe could not secure victory. By the same token, the largess of Britain’s global empire allowed it to exploit the military situation to enlarge the Empire overseas, but all that would have been for naught if German armies won the war in Flanders in France. From the outset, the Western Front was bound to become the epicenter of the war. Between 1914-18, no other place on earth consumed more men, materiel, and money per square mile than that narrow patch of

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260 See Chapter 5.
262 TNA FO 383/288, supplementary letters forwarded by the Censor, Indian Mails, in France, January 10, 1917.
ground housing the opposing armies. Casualty figures for the opening months of the war have lost nothing of their numbing effect even a century later. Losses in the French Army were the worst among the war’s participants: 160,000 killed, wounded and missing in August 1914; 200,000 more in September; 80,000 in October; 70,000 in November. By the end of the Battle of Ypres, the German Army had lost nearly 241,000, including 99,000 in the 20 to 24 years age group. Belgium had suffered 30,000 dead, as had the British Expeditionary Force.\(^{264}\)

By all accounts, the seemingly inexhaustible resources of the combined British and French empires should have made winning the war on the Western Front a relatively simple affair.\(^{265}\) The *Times* boasted in September 1914:

> When the illimitable resources of the British Empire, our grand Fleet, our unconquerable Army, the flower of the manhood of these islands, our heroic kinsmen from overseas, our chivalrous Indian troops, are placed in the scale in this mighty struggle from which we will never flinch nor falter, who can doubt what the end will be?\(^{266}\)

Indeed, after four years of stalemate, the impression among some of Germany’s elite shock troops was that no amount of work on their behalf could have overcome Germany’s deficiencies in manpower and materiel. Franz Schauwecker, darling of Germany’s postwar radical Right, wrote of the situation in October 1918:

> More than six and a half million French, English, American, Belgian and Italian soldiers now stand along the front. Every month, three hundred thousand fresh Americans arrive in France, as do nearly as many colored soldiers from France’s colonies. Along with

\(^{266}\) “The Rally of the Empire,” *The Times*, September 10, 1914.
these men arrive seven thousand tanks and countless guns, mortars, machineguns, planes, balloons, and grenades.267

But economic determinism makes for a poor predictor of battlefield outcomes, and the British Empire spent most of the war squandering its advantages. To some degree, British commanders cannot be blamed for the horrendous casualties their men suffered. In the age of the machinegun, trench warfare gave significant advantages to the Germans who, for most of the war on the Western Front, were on the defensive. Yet this is not to say that we should accept without qualification the principle strategy adopted by the British, to fight a war of attrition.268 True, General Haig clung to the idea of a breakthrough, but his strategy of repeat massive assaults on the German lines, and no less his obsession with the body count of each affair, produced only one disaster after another. For all but eight out of sixty-four months between February 1915 and the end of the war, the Germans inflicted heavier casualties on the British on the Western Front.269 British casualties at the Somme in 1916 amounted to 57,470 on the first day alone.270 Despite the fiasco, Haig renewed the attack several times from that summer through the winter. The Battle of the Somme did not officially end until November 18, almost five months after it began. By that time, 419,654 British soldiers had become casualties of the battlefield alongside 200,000 French.271

However flawed the logic that manpower was the key to victory, it meant that Indians played a crucial role between 1914-15 when Britain’s mass volunteer army had
yet to take the field fully. The British Empire, and no less its French allies, faced a
desperate situation when the Indian Corps first arrived at the front in October 1914. The
five corps comprising the British Expeditionary Force had only recently taken up its
positions outside the city of Ypres between October 8 and 19. The battle that became
known as the First Battle of Ypres began with the BEF pressing forward of the ancient
city towards the ridges that dominated the landscape nearly five miles to the east –
Passchendaele, Broodseinde, Gheluvelt, and Messines. Fresh German troops halted the
British advance and then counterattacked, pushing the British back to the ramparts of the
city. On October 20, the new German commander, General Erich von Falkenhayn,
determined to win the war in France before turning Germany’s forces against the
Russians, launched a general offensive against the whole front from La Bassée canal in
the south to the estuary of Yser in the north, twenty-four German divisions against
nineteen British and Belgian divisions.272

With bodies in short supply, British command fed the recently arrived Indian
troops piecemeal into the lines in order to stem the German onslaught. On October 22,
the 1st Battalion Connaught Rangers, accompanied by the 57th Rifles and the 129th
Baluchis of the Ferozepore Brigade, Lahore Division, became the first regiments of the
Indian Corps to take up positions on the Western Front, in the trenches outside Ypres. On
the night of October 26, the 57th Rifles took its first casualties while repulsing a small
German attack. Later that day, as steady rain turned the hastily dug trenches to pools of
mud, the Connaught Rangers, 57th Rifles, and 129th Baluchis received their orders to
advance across no-man’s-land. The 57th Rifles sustained light casualties during the attack.

In addition to the Regiment’s Lt-Colonel, who had taken shrapnel in the right shoulder earlier that morning, eleven Indians were wounded. Darkness fell before the regiment could reach its objective and the men received orders to retire. The 129th Baluchis, meanwhile, whose advance was slowed by ground conditions, took heavy fire from German artillery, machineguns, and rifles. By the time darkness fell, the Baluchis succeeded in reaching a point within 200 yards of the German trenches only to then receive orders to retire to their original line. In the course of its first day at the front, the 129th Baluchis lost one British Officer and nine other ranks killed, 48 wounded, and 4 missing.273

The battle of Ypres swelled as more men and materiel rushed headlong to one of the “dreariest landscapes in Western Europe.”274 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 virtually every aspect of materiel.275 Everywhere, the Germans held the high ground. “Our men had to face mortars, hand-grenades, high explosive shell, and a hundred other engines or contrivances of war, with which they themselves were not provided,” General Willcocks later wrote of the situation.276 Historian John Keegan comments that only the superiority of the British in rapid rifle fire held the lines at Ypres. The Germans outgunned their enemies in artillery two to one, and in heavy artillery ten to one.277 On the morning of October 30, German artillery began to lay down a murderous rain of explosives on the 129th Baluchis and 57th

273 Merewether and Smith, Indian Corps, 21-28.
274 Keegan, The First World War, 129.
275 Merewether and Smith, Indian Corps, 30.
276 Willcocks, With the Indians in France, 83.
277 Keegan, The First World War, 132.
Rifles. That afternoon, German infantry attacked, swarming over positions held by British and Indian troops. No. 3 Company of the 57th Rifles, enveloped in a murderous machinegun fire, fought until its numbers were reduced from 140 to 60. Before dawn the following day, nine German battalions attacked the town of Messines. During the advance, they surrounded Co. 2 of the 57th Rifles, wiping out every soldier with the exception of Jemadar Ram Singh who, wounded, managed to crawl back to a trench in the rear. At the same time, a fierce German attack on Co. 3 of the 57th Rifles resulted in hand-to-hand combat that put most of the Company out of action. Havildar Gagna killed five Germans before his bayonet broke. Picking up a sword, he continued to fight until, after receiving six wounds, he collapsed. Still alive when Allied forces later retook the trench, he was awarded the 2nd Class, Indian Order of Merit.278 By the time the 57th Rifles left the front lines a few days later, the regiment had lost 6 British officers and 4 Indian officers. Among the rank-and-file, 192 had been killed or wounded and 98 were missing, presumed killed.279

Through late October and early November, British command fed the remainder of the Indian Corps into the trenches outside Ypres. The 15th Sikhs, 34th Sikh Pioneers, and 59th Rifles entered the trenches south of Ypres running from Givenchy to Aubers and Laventie in support of French cavalry on October 24 where they repulsed a number of attacks through the start of November. Meanwhile the 9th Bhopals and 47th Sikhs attacked Neuve Chapelle, capturing the village on October 28 by means of desperate street fighting. After fending off several German counterattacks, the Indian units were

278 Merewether and Smith, Indian Corps, 36. 279 Ibid, 39.
compelled to abandon the village only when they learned that reinforcements were unavailable.\textsuperscript{280}

Without any opportunity to acclimate to the novel conditions of the Western Front, Indian troops experienced a steep learning curve in those first weeks in the trenches. A non-commissioned officer in the 47\textsuperscript{th} Sikhs wrote to an acquaintance in Amritsar, describing the fighting on October 28:

> My company suffered heavy loss & inflicted the same upon the enemy, many of whom were taken prisoner & many killed. Before this too we had had heavy fighting & our troops had proved their fidelity to Government, so that our renown was very great.\textsuperscript{281}

On October 30, every available body in the 129\textsuperscript{th} Baluchis went into the firing line to repulse a German assault. Grievously wounded while defending the Indian trenches, machine gunner Khudadad Khan of the 129\textsuperscript{th} Baluchis received the Victoria Cross, the first Indian soldier to do so. The regiment then took up positions in trenches alongside the 18\textsuperscript{th} Hussars in the early morning of October 31 where they spent most of that day enduring a German bombardment. The Regiment’s No. 4 Company, ordered to hold a farm in advance of the line, hastily retreated from the position after allowing a body of Germans – whom they believed to be French soldiers - to advance unmolested until it was too late to correct the mistake. At 3 a.m. on November 1, three companies of the 129\textsuperscript{th} attacked and recaptured the farm after grisly hand-to-hand fighting. In the span of its first week in the trenches, the 129\textsuperscript{th} Baluchis lost three British officers killed, and three

\textsuperscript{280} Ibid, 55.
\textsuperscript{281} IOR L/MIL/5/825/1, from a non-commissioned officer of the 47\textsuperscript{th} Sikhs to _ at Amritsar.
wounded. Indian officers: three killed and two wounded. Other ranks: 164 killed or wounded and 64 missing, of whom the majority were killed.\textsuperscript{282}

The shock of combat took a sharp toll on the mental health of many soldiers. The first cases of shell-shock appeared early in the war in every army. By 1918, five percent of all beds at base hospitals in Germany were reserved for men suffering from shell-shock.\textsuperscript{283} Soldiers suffering from post-traumatic stress exhibited a range of symptoms, which military authorities sometimes dealt with in the harshest terms.\textsuperscript{284} In late 1914, British authorities began to suspect that Indians were self-inflicting wounds in order to escape duty at the front. By the start of November, more than half of the 1,848 Indians admitted to hospital had sustained hand wounds.\textsuperscript{285} British authorities acted quickly to reduce the number of sepoys they believed were trying to escape frontline duty. General Willcocks promptly had five of the sepoys shot for cowardice and assured Lord Kitchener that the matter had been dealt with.\textsuperscript{286} Cases of hand wounds dropped off afterwards. They reappeared suddenly in early May 1915 among sepoys freshly arrived from India. Willcocks again made an example of some offenders and again rates of hand wounds fell.\textsuperscript{287}

British commanders did not overlook the contribution of the Indian Corps to the military situation at Ypres. On November 10, for example, General Willcocks reported to

\textsuperscript{282} Merewether and Smith, \textit{Indian Corps}, 39.
\textsuperscript{286} TNA PRO 30/57/52, Willcocks to Fitzgerald, November 10, 1914.
\textsuperscript{287} Jack, ―The Indian Army on the Western Front,” 340-341.
the War Office that the officers and men of the Indian Corps were fighting well.\textsuperscript{288} “During this long-drawn-out and fiercely contested battle, they fully sustained their own reputations and the honour of the Indian Army,” Merewether and Smith later wrote of the situation.\textsuperscript{289}

It can thus be easily seen that the position was extremely hazardous, in view of the pitiful weakness of our line and the proximity of a daring and pertinacious enemy, whose numbers greatly exceeded ours, while his resources in guns, trench mortars, and grenades were vastly superior to anything which we could oppose to them. … In spite of all the disadvantages under which it labored, the Corps had so far won through without relinquishing any material portion of its original line.\textsuperscript{290}

But the demand for bodies was relentless, and fighting continued up and down the length of the British and Indian sector of the Western Front through the end of the year. Between November and December, the Meerut Division served 25 consecutive days in the trenches.\textsuperscript{291} In late November, the Germans resumed their own search for a breakthrough, this time around the village of Festubert. The battle turned into a back-and-forth slugfest. The snow-covered ground slowed troop movements and made the men easy targets for rifle, machinegun, and artillery fire. On November 24, the Germans succeeded in driving Indian troops from their trenches in some places. In other places the sepoys held their ground. At 4:30 pm, the 2/8\textsuperscript{th} Gurkhas along with the 34\textsuperscript{th} Pioneers, 6\textsuperscript{th} Jats, Connaughts, and 58\textsuperscript{th} Rifles counterattacked, retaking the positions that had been

\textsuperscript{288} TNA PRO 30/57/52, Willcocks to Fitzgerald, November 10, 1914.
\textsuperscript{289} Merewether and Smith, \textit{Indian Corps}, 39.
\textsuperscript{290} Ibid, 112-113.
\textsuperscript{291} Imperial War Museum [hereafter IWM], H.V. Lewis to his mother, December 19, 1914.
lost earlier that day. In mid-December, Germans and Indians fought another series of fierce battles focused around the town of Givenchy. One Sikh described the fighting:

On the 18th day of the twelfth month the 15th, 47th, the 59th & the 9th, these four regiments were surrounded. They formed a square and fought hard. There were seven brigades of the enemy round them. Both sides lost heavily.  

The man’s regiment fought again on Christmas Eve.

There was a very fierce fight. The whole line advanced & the enemy’s guns roasted our regiments even as grain is parched. On all sides men were fighting with sword & bayonet.

A Punjabi Muslim wrote to his brother serving in the 29th Punjabis in East Africa in January that the entire Lahore Division “has fought very well.” He added for emphasis, “All the Indians have fought well and a great victory is being won.”

Soldiers on both sides of no-man’s-land praised the doggedness and fighting abilities of the Indian troops. German soldiers belonging to the 112th Regiment captured at Festubert in November said that the Indian soldiers who counterattacked “showed great determination” and that the advance was “well conducted.” Other captured German soldiers “spoke highly of the gallant attack made upon them [by Indian troops] and explained that further resistance on their part would have been futile.”

Friedrich Kreuzer, wounded early on the morning of November 23 and taken prisoner by an Indian regiment, “expressed admiration for the Indian troops” during an examination

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292 IOR L/MIL/17347, from a wounded Sikh to a friend in India, January 20, 1915.
293 Ibid.
294 IOR L/MIL/5/825/1, from a wounded sepoy to his brother serving in the 29th Punjabis in Africa, January 15, 1915.
conducted two days later at the Secunderabad Cavalry Brigade Field Ambulance.  

Serving with the Indian Corps, Officer H.V. Lewis wrote to his mother on December 19:

I told you yesterday how we attacked the German trenches with what turned out to be rather less than ½ a bataln. & how splendidly our men did. We rushed from our trenches across the open into a German sap about 30 yards ahead, just before dawn. We did this in two places. Both the first rushes succeeded, but then dawn broke and every single man who tried to cross those fatal 30 yards after that was shot. It was sickening. They were absolutely fearless & have gained the admiration of everyone who saw or heard of them.  

And still, the British Empire remained no-less desperate for bodies at the front.

By the close of 1914, two months of grizzly combat left the Indian Corps exhausted and scrambling to replenish its depleted ranks. Indian regiments first went to the front at a full strength of 764 men. At the start of November, the average strength of the committed Indian regiments stood at less than 550. The 47th Sikhs were down to 385 men, the 15th Sikhs to 392, the 9th Bhopals to 469, and the 58th Rifles to 461. On a single day in late October, the 2/8th Gurkhas broke after losing over 600 men while trying to repulse a German assault. Between the period of October 24 and November 1, the 15th Sikhs lost 3 British and 3 Indian officers wounded; other ranks, 11 killed, 240 wounded, and 12 missing. In the fighting around Givenchy on December 19 and 20, the 1/4th Gurkhas lost 302 men from their ranks, including 7 British and 10 Gurkha officers. On December 20

298 IWM, H.V. Lewis to his mother, December 19, 1914.
300 Ibid, 56.
alone, the 1/1st Gurkhas lost 2 British officers and over 200 men.301 All told, the Indian Corps had suffered 1397 dead, 5860 wounded, and 2322 missing by the start of 1915.302 The diary of Brigadier P. Mortimer, serving with the Indian Corps, reveals that popular perception held that the figures were even higher: “Heard that casualties in Indian Army Corps since arrival in Flanders on 30th October to end of December totaled 12,200 of all ranks.”303 In Germany, the Tägliche Rundschau reported that the Indian troops had suffered so heavily that the Allies had revised their initial casualty reports.304 Missionary Paul Walter wrote from the safety of Lille where he kept busy interviewing captured Indian prisoners, “From the English newspapers and casualty lists, the 2/2 Gurkhas … has had very large losses and has probably been wiped out.”305

The offensives in which the Indian Corps took part in 1915 - Neuve Chapelle, Second Ypres, Festubert, and Loos - yielded little strategic gain in exchange for a horrific loss of life. After a brief spell resting in billets behind the lines, the Indian Corps returned to the front in February and March to participate in Field Marshal French’s early spring offensive at Neuve Chapelle. In the span of three days, between March 10 and 12, the Corps lost 60 Indian officers and 2128 Indian killed, wounded, and missing.306 The 47th Sikhs went into battle at Second Ypres on April 22 with 11 British officers, 10 Indian officers, and 423 other ranks. On the morning of April 27, the regiment numbered only 2

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301 Merewether and Smith, Indian Corps, 174.
302 Ibid, 199.
305 PAAA R21244, Paul Walter to Oppenheim, December 7, 1914.
British officers, 2 Indian officers, and 92 other ranks.\textsuperscript{307} By the start of May, casualties in the Indian Corps hit 18,573, slightly more than 77 percent of the original 24,000 that had disembarked at Marseilles the previous September and October.\textsuperscript{308} In September, as heavy rains turned the fields around Loos to a swampy morass, the 2/8\textsuperscript{th} Gurkhas had to yield 200 yards of captured ground to a fierce German counterattack, leaving behind 481 sepoys, killed, wounded, or missing.\textsuperscript{309} The 69\textsuperscript{th} Punjabis, who arrived in France in May after serving in Egypt and Gallipoli, lost 348 men out of a total strength of 663.\textsuperscript{310} The 58\textsuperscript{th} Rifles lost eight of its British officers, five of its Indian officers, and 245 sepoys.\textsuperscript{311} Despite the slaughter, the Indian soldiers generally remained loyal to the military hierarchy and went over the top at every sound of the Officer’s whistle.

The Battle of Neuve Chapelle in March 1915 had all the elements that contributed to disaster after disaster on the Western Front. Field Marshal French’s plan for the attack on Neuve Chapelle was simple. Neuve Chapelle, a ruined village 20 miles south of Ypres, was to be attacked on March 10 by the British 7\textsuperscript{th} and 8\textsuperscript{th} Divisions as well as both divisions belonging to the Indian Corps. The front of attack extended about 8,000 yards, behind which the British assembled 500 guns and a stock of 200,000 shells. As light-caliber shells dropped into the German trenches, a barrage of heavier explosives would drop behind the German front line trenches to prevent reinforcements from advancing.\textsuperscript{312}

The bombardment opened at seven o’clock on the morning of March 10, taking the Germans completely by surprise. The advancing British and Indian troops quickly

\textsuperscript{307} Merewether and Smith, \textit{Indian Corps}, 297.
\textsuperscript{308} Ibid, 336.
\textsuperscript{309} Ibid, 421.
\textsuperscript{310} Ibid, 436.
\textsuperscript{311} Ibid, 444.
\textsuperscript{312} Keegan, \textit{The First World War}, 192-193; Neiberg, \textit{Fighting the Great War}, 74-77.
overran the defenders, two infantry regiments and a Jäger battalion. At 8:05 a.m., the 1/39th Garhwal Rifles, 2nd Leicestershires, 2/3rd Gurkha Rifles and 2/39th Garhwal Rifles went over the top, reaching and capturing the German frontline trenches by 8:30.313

Before nine in the morning, writes John Keegan, “the makings of a victory, local but significant, had been won.”314 But then the factors that made for failure on the Western Front began to set in, as they would time and time again. German troops abandoned the village and retreated towards strongpoints, which had been built precisely to prevent any enemy breakthroughs. British infantry then received orders to hold their positions momentarily before advancing further. This allowed German machine gunners the precious time they needed to get ready for action. Wave after wave of soldiers fell as thousands of British and Indian troops tried to squeeze through a narrow corridor. As German junior officers hurried reserves to the flanks and responded to events on the ground as they were happening, British junior officers passed their observations of the local situation back up the chain of command and waited for permission from the Corps commander, five miles behind the lines, to alter the pre-battle plans. The Dehra Dun Brigade, supported by two battalions of the Jullundur Brigade, did not receive its orders to advance until after 3 p.m. The troops were not deployed and actually ready to attack until 4:30 p.m. As the Brigade advanced, German rifles and machineguns opened up on its left flank and the attackers were forced to withdraw and dig in along the banks of a river.315 The advance ground to a halt.316

313 Action Taken by the Indian Corps, 3.
315 Action Taken by the Indian Corps, 3.
Nor did the advance continue the following day. A thick mist enveloped the field, preventing artillery from locating targets. Both sides spent the day consolidating their positions. The Indian troops received orders to prepare to continue the attack the next day. As the mist cleared that night, German artillery opened fire on Neuve Chapelle. The Jullundur Brigade took 300 casualties before dawn the next morning when it was ordered to advance through the thick of the bombardment into the village.\footnote{317}{Action Taken by the Indian Corps, 4.} On March 12, the Germans launched a counterattack that was quickly halted by twenty machineguns the British had placed at well-chosen positions along their new front lines. At the northern portion of the front held by the Indian Corps, units belonging to the 6th Bavarian Reserve Division and the XIX Corps took very heavily casualties. By the early afternoon, commanders were satisfied that the German attack had been halted and ordered the Jullundur and the Sirhind Brigades to advance. A murderous enfilade fire raked the ranks of the Indian troops who had to withdraw after heavy casualties. Later that night, the Corps received orders to halt all further operations and consolidate positions.

Though the exchange ratio of casualties favored the Germans – there were in total 11,652 British killed, wounded, missing (2188 of whom were Indians) to 8600 German – British Command judged the seesaw battle a partial success.\footnote{318}{Keegan, The First World War, 195.} “I desire to express to all ranks of the 1st Army my great appreciation of the task accomplished by them in the past four days of severe fighting,” Douglas Haig wrote in his Special Order to the Army on March 14. The 1st Army, he reported, had captured German trenches along a two mile front, inflicting “very serious” losses on the enemy: 2000 prisoners and 16,000 killed and wounded. The organization of the German forces from Ypres to La Bassée “has been
thrown into a state of confusion,‖ he asserted, and the British soldier “has once more
given the Germans a proof of his superiority in a fight, as well of his pluck and
determination to conquer.”  

The problem had nothing to do with the “pluck” of British and Indian soldiers,
much less the ability of Indians to adapt to industrial warfare, and everything to do with
the fact that the conditions for stalemate had set in and British commanders continued to
expect absolute deference from the sepoys. General Willcocks maintained after the war
that one of his chief difficulties as commander had been to “make it understood that the
Indians cannot be treated as pure machines.” But in January 1915, when he complained
that the Indians fought too much, Haig snapped: “But after all is said and done, is that not
the reason for the Army being here?” In fact, by the summer of 1915, Haig maintained
that the Indian Corps was being underutilized, owing to repeated refusals by Willcocks to
allow the Indians to take part in operations.

Amidst the shellfire, some sepoys at the front engaged in various acts of
resistance in order to save themselves from the gruesome fate that met so many of their
comrades. Disobeying orders and abandoning a frontline post was a very risky business.
Military authorities on both sides of no-man’s-land claimed a monopoly over the right to
deploy the bodies of soldiers, and insubordination or perceived acts of cowardice merited
the severest forms of punishment. The British army went to great lengths to maintain
military discipline, sentencing 3080 of its own soldiers to death for desertion, cowardice,

319 “Special Order to the Army,” in Action Taken by the Indian Corps, 29.
320 Willcocks, With the Indians in France, 7.
321 Jack, “The Indian Army on the Western Front,” 347.
322 Ibid, 349.
323 Julian Putkowski and Julian Sykes, Shot at Dawn: Executions in World War One by
Authority of the British Army Act (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 1999).
mutiny and other offences.\textsuperscript{324} Executions and punishments were always public spectacles, grim reminders to soldiers to follow orders and respect the military hierarchy. Despite the risk and such “everyday” forms of coercion, some sepoys offered open resistance. At the front, such forms of resistance fell far short of the kind of outright, collective defiance – in a word, mutiny – British authorities feared. Nonetheless, some sepoys did engage in an act that openly challenged the military hierarchy: desertion. This high-risk method of self-help reflected the conditions and constraints under which soldiers operated at the front.

Cases of desertion occurred periodically throughout the war, though most suspected cases belonged to the infantry. Going over the top in the hope that the Germans might offer refuge was a very risky gamble. A German Lieutenant stationed opposite the Indian Corps wrote that on the night of November 10, a number of Indians tried to desert to the German trenches. “It was dark out and as our men had no way of knowing whether the Indians meant to attack us instead, we shot them all down.” In the morning, the Germans found the Indian soldiers, “dead, lying in front of our trench, without any weapons.”\textsuperscript{325} Some soldiers did succeed in reaching the German lines safely. Naik Hardas Singh of the 41\textsuperscript{st} Dogras deserted to the German lines in February 1915 after shooting a British officer, Major H. Barstow, in revenge for punishment he had received on a report from the Major.\textsuperscript{326} On the night of March 2-3, 23 sepoys belonging to the 58\textsuperscript{th} Rifles abandoned their posts. Two sepoys belonging to the 57\textsuperscript{th} Rifles deserted one night in August 1915, as did another pair belonging to the 27\textsuperscript{th} Punjabis on October 8. A group of

\textsuperscript{324} Ferguson, \textit{The Pity of War}, 346.
\textsuperscript{325} PAAA R21077, letter from Leutnant Schniewind, January 13, 1915.
\textsuperscript{326} IOR L/MIL/7/3896, Major H. Barstow to War Office, April 1915.
at least 11 Afghans belonging to the 40th Pathans deserted sometime in late 1915. By December 1915, British authorities had reached the consensus that the men deserted “not due to disloyalty or a desire to join the enemy,” but because desertion to the German lines appeared to offer “a short cut to India and home.”

This conclusion is not wrong, yet it is something of an oversimplification. Consider the case of the 23 soldiers from the 58th Rifles who deserted to the German lines in March 1915. Their story is as much a local story – that of a particular group of soldiers in a particular regiment – as it is a global story – one embedded in the countercurrents of the British and German empires. The evening of March 2, 1915, was clear and crisp. Along a small section of the front outside Vielle Chapelle, the 58th Rifles Frontier Force relieved the 1/9th Gurkhas, taking up positions in advance of the rest of the army in pickets. Except for the occasional crack of a sniper’s rifle, the night was mostly quiet and the calm undisturbed. At 1 a.m. the commanding officer of the regiment’s 4th Company, which occupied a small orchard and scattered pickets, discovered while making his rounds that one post that had been tended by an Indian N.C.O. and 7 men had been deserted. For the rest of the night until the approaching dawn made it unsafe to do so, patrols went out at irregular but frequent intervals to find the missing soldiers with no success. It was as if they had just vanished. Under orders, another Indian Officer and 15 sepoys moved forward and occupied the position.

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327 IOR L/MIL/17/5/2403, List A, Nominal Roll of Indian Prisoners of War, suspected of having deserted to the enemy or of having given information to or otherwise assisted the enemy after capture, revised October 24, 1918.
328 TNA WO 32/5110, letter from Sir Walter Lawrence to Kitchener, December 14, 1915.
329 TNA WO 95/3948, War Diary of the 58th Rifles.
With no further information forthcoming about the missing soldiers, all evidence pointed to desertion. Most of the men belonging to the 58th spent a rainy March 3 building up traverses and repairing the brick flooring of the redoubts, all the while dodging occasional snipers’ rounds. Around 6 p.m., a party of soldiers sent out to check on the 16 Indian soldiers who had taken the place of their deserted comrades in the forward picket found the position empty yet again. Now events moved quickly. Scottish soldiers belonging to the Black Watch Regiment moved into the forward position by 9 p.m. Two hours later, having concluded that the 24 missing Afridis had all deserted to the enemy (the figure would later be revised to 23), orders came down to relieve and disarm all remaining Afridi soldiers in the Regiment. The British 4th Suffolk Regiment relieved the 58th Rifles from the lines, while the Seaforth Highlanders disarmed all 120 men belonging to 4th Company and escorted the men to a separate location.³³⁰

The men spent most of the month under guard as authorities tried to figure out what to do. On March 26, cooler heads prevailed. James Willcocks ordered that seven Afridis from the Regiment return to India under guard: (1) Havildar Banat, (2) Naik Saiyad Kasim, (3) Naik Sakhi Shah, (4) Naik Shar Akmad, (5) Sepoy Gul Hafan, (6) Sepoy Yar Shah, and (7) Sepoy Gulab Shah. He allowed the rest of the men to return to their regiment. With the exception of Naik Shar Akmad, all of the soldiers returned to India were relatives of the deserters. Willcocks suspected Naik Shar Akmad of being in sympathy with the deserters. Two additional soldiers, Havildar Duli Kan and Rana Sahib Shah were also returned to India as “undesirables.” While Willcocks did not recommend any sort of special punishment beyond removal of service, the Secretary of State for India

³³⁰ Ibid.
expressed to the Viceroy his hesitancy to adopt such a policy. “I am doubtful if it would be expedient to follow such a course; on the return to their homes they will spread injurious report and be centers for propagating grievances.” The only alternative, the Secretary suggested, was to attach the men for duty to some unit in India “where they would do no mischief.”[^331]

Comprised of men drawn from the Punjab, India’s Northwest Frontier, and neighboring Afghanistan, the 58th Rifles had been involved in some of the worst fighting on the Western Front. The Regimental War Diary of the 58th reveals that the 23 men who deserted had been in some of the unit’s most harrowing situations: two of them, Jemadar Mir Mast and Sepoy Azam Khan were due to receive the Indian Distinguished Medal for exemplary conduct under fire. Part of the Bareilly Brigade, Meerut Division, the regiment first arrived at the Western Front on October 30 to repulse a strong German attack at Givenchy. At 2:30 a.m. on October 31, the regiment rushed German trenches, capturing them with minimal casualties. For the entirety of the next day, however, the men could do nothing more than huddle in their trenches and dodge a murderous bombardment of artillery and trench mortars from nearby German troops. Soldiers at this point in the war were not yet digging traverses into trenches. If an explosive device landed squarely in one of them, there was nothing but human bodies to stop the blast and shrapnel. After a full day of this, the 58th lost 3 of its British officers and 5 other ranks killed, in addition to 4 Indian officers and 79 other ranks wounded.[^332]

Enduring bombardments became part of the routine for the 58th Rifles. Engaged alternatively through the month of November, as many as sixty projectiles fell squarely

[^332]: Merewether and Smith, *Indian Corps*, 75-76.
on their trenches on the morning of November 22. When the battle of Festubert broke two
days later, the regiment was in the very thick of the fighting. Although the men held most
of their positions, they did so at a terrible loss of life, one company losing nearly 75
percent of its strength, including the C.O. Ordered later that same day to retake a line
of trenches that had been lost, some of the men hesitated before attacking but then
proceeded to retake the trenches. In the course of the action, the regiment lost 3 British
officers, one Indian officer, and 42 other ranks killed; 2 British officers, one Indian
officer, and 61 other ranks wounded; and 11 missing. Between December 19 and 22,
the regiment fought nearly without a break in heavy rain and mud, losing one British
officer, one Indian officer, and 24 other ranks killed, and 32 other ranks wounded.

The 58th spent most of January recuperating, only to return to the trenches in
February. During that month the regiment held waterlogged positions outside Vielle
Chapelle, spending most of their time above ground behind breastworks. These gave
German artillery, assisted by signalers in the German trenches only 90 to 200 yards from
the Indian lines, a good mark. On February 5, German artillery breached the parapets in
several places with high explosives and proceeded to burst shrapnel above and in the rear
of the parapets. During the first ten days of the month, the Regiment lost one Indian
officer and suffered another nine casualties among the rank-and-file. Reduced to 11
British officers, 13 Indian officers, and 520 rank-and-file, the Regiment withdrew from
the front lines to billets on February 10. During a rest period lasting through February 23,
the Regiment trained in the use of bombs and rifle grenades outside Le Petit Pacaut,

333 Ibid, 119.
334 Ibid, 124.
335 Ibid, 192.
while the men enjoyed the opportunity to bathe at various local breweries. On February 12, 3 Indian Officers and 97 rank-and-file of the 82nd Punjabis joined the Regiment as reinforcements. On February 24, the Regiment marched eight miles to Vielle Chapelle where it remained in billets through March 1.\footnote{336 TNA WO 95/3948, War Diary of the 58th Rifles.}

January and February had been relatively quiet compared to the closing months of 1914, yet it must have been clear to the men that another huge engagement – in this case, Neuve Chapelle – lay just around the corner. A Dogra wounded and in hospital in England wrote to a friend in India on March 3,\footnote{337 IOR L/MIL/17347, from a wounded Dogra to a friend in India, March 3, 1915.}

The English are only now beginning to prepare material such as the Germans have had all along – twelve machine guns such as one man can lift per company, bombs, &c. Guns are used in enormous numbers. For a month the fighting was stopped on account of the snow. Now it has begun again, from the 3rd March 1915. It will be at its height in March and April and after that there will be an advance from 260 miles of trench. Then the matter will be decided.

As evidence mounted that command was about to launch another major – and disastrous – offensive, the soldiers likely understood that if desertion offered any hope of surviving the war, they had to act fast. Stationed in an advance position on the night of March 2-3, they men had to know that this was as good a chance as they might ever have to save their own lives. At that time, some sepoys spoke openly about deserting to the German lines. In February, the Censor of Indian Mail inferred that some Afghans serving in the 129th Baluchis had reached the breaking point. He wrote in his report on the workings of the Indian Mail Censorship,
In February it was shown that the breaking-strain was near and correspondence revealing a disposition on the part of certain trans-border Pathans to secure safety by deserting to the enemy was brought to notice. The letters, written in very guarded language, from which this inference was deduced, were withheld and no cases of desertion occurred in the regiment from which they emanated.\(^\text{338}\)

The intended soldiers in the 129\(^{th}\) may not have received the letters, but their contents survive today in the Censor’s Reports. Eight letters in total, all written in Urdu by a Pathan who took the dictations of his wounded comrades recovering in hospitals, were “full of injunctions to obey the behest of the Almighty by using the eyes, ears, hands, and feet which God gave for the preservation of man’s life.” In one letter the writer urged: “Never mind about promotion. What you have to think about now is preserving your life.” After describing the situation as “delicate,” the letter continued, “We have to see to it that the spit is not burned as well as the meat.” Alluding to various conversations held in the trenches, the letter concluded, “What you suggested to me one day in the support trenches I now approve of.”\(^\text{339}\)

Can this collection of censored letters to soldiers in the 129\(^{th}\) Baluchis help us better understand the decision of 23 soldiers in the 58\(^{th}\) Rifles? The Censor believed they could: those men belonged to the same class and tribe as the 23 Afridis from the 58\(^{th}\) who deserted in March.\(^\text{340}\) The Censor only read a tiny fraction of the letters to and from the soldiers in France and while he did not intercept any letters of this nature addressed to men in the 58\(^{th}\) Rifles, we do know that Afghan soldiers in the 129\(^{th}\) and 58\(^{th}\) wrote to one another. Hence this interesting letter, written by a Pathan in hospital in England to a


\(^{339}\) IOR, L/MIL/17347, note by the Censor, February 3, 1915.

\(^{340}\) Ibid.
Jemadar in the 129th Baluchis serving in France on March 3, in which the man suggests that trans-frontier tribes of India and Afghanistan had risen up against the British:

Do not be distressed, our people, the Afridis, the Mohmands, the Swatis and the Kabulis have begun a great fight with the English. They say to the English, ‘Bring back our Indians.’ We all hope to go back to our country, India. Do not be distressed.341

Letters like this were not isolated to Afghans serving in these two regiments. A Pathan sepoy in the 57th Rifles serving in India wrote to a friend in the same regiment serving in France: “Gul Khan has bought a rifle for Rs. 180. In every house a rifle has been bought. Nakhan and Nur Akbar and the whole village have bought rifles.”342 Conditions at the front, therefore, coupled with rumors about deteriorating conditions at home, offered Afghans in particular “push” and “pull” reasons for deserting to the German lines.

But these considerations alone are not sufficient enough to explain the phenomenon: the soldiers also had to believe that their chances were better with the Germans than they were with the British. German authorities, working in conjunction with Ghadar agents on the Indian Independence Committee, had been cultivating this very notion from the outset of the war. The Indian Committee hoped that some of its members, stationed just behind the front, could win the allegiance of recently captured Indian soldiers who would then return to their comrades in the trenches. In this way, entire regiments of Indian troops could be compelled to desert to the German lines.343

The plan was not as farfetched as it might seem. One recently captured Indian deserter told his German captives in the 6th Army in December 1914 that, if released to his own

341 IOR L/MIL/17347, from a wounded Pathan to a Jemadar in the 129th Baluchis, March 3, 1915.
342 IOR l?mil/17347, from a sepoy in the 57th Rifles to a friend serving in France, undated.
343 PAAA R21075, “A brief summary of the plan of the Indian Committee in Berlin.”
lines, he would convince others to desert as well. In November, German airplanes dropped a number of leaflets over the British and Indian trenches in France. One of these pamphlets read:

The Sheikh-ul-Islam has proclaimed a Jehad (holy war) on the Id day at Mecca against the British, the Russians, and the French.

The Sultan has commenced the war against the oppressive British, Russian, and French, and he has been joined by the Afghans.

German Army Command in France collected more revolutionary leaflets in January 1915 provided by Ghadar activists in San Francisco, calling on Hindus to fight against English rule in India. “You brave Indian soldiers,” read one, “do not follow the common English. These English tyrants suck the blood of your veins like vampires.”

In late February, the Germans planted incitements to disloyalty written in Urdu and Gurmukhi in glass bottles in front of the Indian lines. One pamphlet written by Lieutenant Rabah Abdallah Boukabouya, a North African who deserted to the Germans early in the war, lobbed similar accusations at the French. The animosity held by French troops towards Muslims, the pamphlet claimed, had manifested itself during the war against Turkey in acts that “exceeded the horrors of the war itself.” The pamphlet continued: “We have a duty to mention with gratitude the care that has been shown towards Muslim prisoners by the Germans – the true friends and protectors of Islam.”

Ghadar activists also courted the allegiance of Indian sepoys through more conventional channels of correspondence. In early February, the British Censor

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344 PAAA R21076, dated December 15, 1914.
345 PAAA R21075, extract from the Times, November 26, 1914.
346 PAAA R21077, extracts of leaflets for Indian troops, January 11, 1915.
347 TNA WO 157/599, Indian Corps Intelligence Summaries, February 1915.
intercepted an anonymous letter posted at Vancouver on November 4, 1914 to a Sikh Subadar in France. Written in Gurmukhi by “an educated hand,” all evidence suggests that the letter’s author was a Ghadar member:

> I pray to all my brothers, Hindu and Mussulman, to join together and break the English lock. There is no withstanding Germany (?) Germany burns up all who come (against her). Let no army come from India. Soon there will be a mutiny in India. Let all men join and put an end to the English.\(^{349}\)

French and British propaganda downplayed any effect that German and Ghadar activities might have on the soldiers in France. Senator Henry Bérenger wrote in *Le Siècle* that the Germans must have “the most crass ignorance of native psychology” to believe that Muslims might sacrifice the treasure of French and English rule “for some vague slogans issued by the hirelings of Pangermanism in Constantinople.”\(^{350}\) *The Times*, meanwhile, reported that leaflets distributed from German airplanes in the winter of 1914 over Indian troops were

> … written in Hindi (which is a character few Mahomedans can read), with a grammatical mistake in every line, sometimes two, saying that the Shaikh Ul Islam has on the occasion of the Am Id (a non-existent festival) at Mecca (where he has not been, and does not live) declared a Holy War on the Allies.\(^{351}\)

The British replied by distributing leaflets over German troops written “in good German” declaring “in the name of our Indian troops, that the Indians despise their underhand (overhead?) methods, and consider the Germans their foes and a set of knaves.”\(^{352}\)

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\(^{349}\) IOR L/MIL/17347, note by the Censor, February 3, 1915.
\(^{351}\) “Letters from the Front,” *The Times*, December 11, 1914.
\(^{352}\) Ibid.
Yet evidence embedded in the letters of some soldiers written in early 1915 reveals that German and Ghadar efforts had won them some converts in the Indian ranks. “Be not anxious,” wrote a Pathan Afridi sepoy stationed in Hong Kong to a friend in the 57th Rifles in France. “Man dies by God’s command, not by order of the German Badshah or of Anwar Beg (Enver Bey).—Be of a stout heart. Do not be distressed about your country.” A Pathan sepoy in the 55th Rifles, at Kohat, wrote to a friend in the 58th Rifles in France on February 15:

Remember this one thing, that the Sultan Badshah is one of us. We hear that the German Badshah has become a Mussulman. You are a wise man, understand and think over this.

Then draw your own conclusion. Islam is a good thing. You are out of reach nor can we help you. But we pray much.

Even if the sepoys in France were not prepared to mutiny, many Indians believed that the Germans treated captured Indians kindly. A Pathan serving in France wrote to a friend in India on February 26:

We reached the regiment safely. It is at present withdrawn from the firing line…. – was the first to be missing. Then (four names) were missing. But we have heard of three of them. A letter came in. In it – had written, ‘We are very fit and well.’ These three men are Orakzai and Afridis. This makes a total of 16 men. These men are alive. Do not be anxious. One of them wrote, ‘We have been given a mosque in which we have every facility for saying our prayers. Do not be anxious.’

Another Afridi Havaldar serving in France wrote to his father in Peshawar on February 26:

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353 IOR L/MIL/17347, from a Pathan sepoy, Hong Kong, to a friend in the 57th Rifles in France, January 24, 1915.
354 IOR L/MIL/17347, from a Pathan sepoy in the 55th Rifles to a friend in the 58th Rifles in France, February 15, 1915.
355 IOR L/MIL/17347, from a Pathan serving in France to a friend in India, February 26, 1915.
A letter has come from those of our men whom the Germans took prisoner, and from the men of our regiment, saying, ‘We are now under the German king. You can please yourselves. We are well and happy.’ About 200 men of our regiment were taken prisoner.

After offering some of the names of men taken prisoner, the writer continued: “Pray for us that the God of mercy may deliver us from this destruction. For we are fallen into a grievous calamity.”

Another Afridi of the same regiment wrote on March 1:

Naik Bahadur Khan and Hamesh Gul were both taken prisoner by the Germans. There are many men with them. We have heard from them. They are alive and under the German king. They wrote saying that they were very well and happy.

Makhan Singh, a clerk in the 47th Sikhs serving in France wrote to his sister in India on March 14:

My sister, I write with sorrow that Harnam Singh is a prisoner in the enemy’s country. News of this will have reached you beforehand. We have heard that six men of our regiment are prisoners in Germany. They are quite well and happy, because the Germans deal very lovingly with the men of India & treat them very well. Now he is in no danger of his life.

By all accounts, therefore, Indian sepoys believed that the Germans offered them a chance of surviving the war, a prospect that became increasingly bleak the longer one loyally performed his duty at the front.

What did the deserters themselves later have to say about their decision? Paul Walter interviewed the men in Lille on March 6. They told him that they had planned for some time to desert to the German lines. Although they were aware of the German-
Ottoman alliance and had heard that the Germans treated Indian prisoners well, many of the men still had their doubts. On the night of March 2, therefore, Jemadar Mir Mast sent one of the men across no-man’s-land alone to the German trenches with one of the German leaflets in hand to verify the rumors. When the man was satisfied, he whistled three times, the signal for the seven other men who deserted that night. The Jemadar repeated the same system the following day, when he and 14 other soldiers deserted safely.\footnote{359}

From what the 23 sepoys told their German captors, it also appears that they had some deep-seated political grievances. The Afridis told Walter that the 58\textsuperscript{th} Rifles had already suffered 507 casualties, not counting the sick. The men resented the meager 11 Rupees they were paid each month, adding that the sum was not enough compensation for them to betray their religion. “They are under English rule and do not know when English rule will come to an end,” Walter noted. The men said that they wanted their rifles back so that they could return to Afghanistan to fight alongside the Turks against the English. They also expressed an interest in smuggling weapons to other Afridis in Afghanistan. When Walter asked them how the Germans might be able to compel other Afridis to desert, Jemadar Mir Mast replied:

If you want to do something, just write: “We will give you a Mauser and a good German rifle.” That is enough. Then they will all come.\footnote{360}

Indeed, deserters from the 58\textsuperscript{th} Rifles later told members of the Indian Independence Committee that at the time they came over to the German lines, “they had already arranged for about 300 more to desert the English lines,” but:

\footnote{359}{PAAA R21245, interview by Paul Walter with deserters of the 58\textsuperscript{th} Rifles, March 6, 1915.}
\footnote{360}{Ibid.}
They had made arrangements with the rest that after their arrival in German lines they will send back 2 men … [when] the rest should come over. However the German officers did not allow these 2 men to go back in order to fetch the rest.\(^{361}\)

News of the desertions sent shock waves through the regiment. Jalat Khan, an Afridi of the 58\(^{th}\) Rifles recuperating in hospital wrote to his brother serving with the regiment in France on March 18:

Further it has come to my ears that such a thing has happened in the regiment. But I do not know which sepoys went with Gul Jan. Write & tell me whether Madi Gul has also gone or not. I am very anxious about him. Tell me about him & about the men who have gone.\(^{362}\)

It is likely that some of the soldiers did not approve of the decision, fearing the implications it could have for them and their own family after the war. One Afridi soldier serving in France wrote to a relative at Landi Kotal (presently located on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border) on March 16 with regards to an unrelated incident that took place in his village:

I was very glad to get your letter, but when I heard the other news in it I was more ashamed than I can tell you for the scoundrels who have disgraced the name of our tribe. … You must certainly not give up the service of the Government. My family and your have always served the exalted Government and you must certainly remain in its service.\(^{363}\)

As clients of the British Empire, sepoys and their families depended on the British for status and material security. Alarmed that the overwhelming majority of sepoys who

\(^{361}\) PAAA R21245, summary of information gleaned from deserters of 58\(^{th}\) Rifles.

\(^{362}\) IOR L/MIL/5/825/2, from Jalat Khan, Afridi of the 58\(^{th}\) Rifles to his brother serving in the regiment, March 18, 1915.

\(^{363}\) IOR L/MIL/17347, from an Afridi sepoy to a relative at Landi Kotal, March 16, 1915.
deserted to the German trenches were Afghans, the British stopped recruiting trans-frontier Afghans altogether in late 1915.364

The Western Front was the epicenter of a clash of empires. Desperate for bodies, the British Empire relied heavily on Indian soldiers, at least through the end of 1915. Indian soldiers, although they sustained horrendous casualties, generally remained loyal to the Empire’s military hierarchy. Yet this is not to say that they did not engage in various forms of resistance. Desertion, while certainly high-risk, presented a viable option so long as certain conditions were met. Soldiers belonging to the 58th Rifles deserted on the night of March 2-3 because their position in advance pickets offered them a unique opportunity. The men had endured some of the war’s worst fighting. They surely knew that another major offensive was on the horizon. It is also clear is that German and Ghadar propaganda successfully infiltrated the Indian trenches. It was common knowledge among the Indian soldiers that the Germans treated captured Indians well. Although 23 men could not have orchestrated a successful mutiny, they could choose the far less risky path of deserting to the German lines in the hope that the Reich might secure them safe passage home. The reality is that these men and others like them were not mere pawns in a murderous imperial contest. Yet this was precisely the impression propaganda intended for metropolitan audiences cultivated. It is to this subject that we now turn.

Soldiers of Empire

364 Jack, “The Indian Army on the Western Front,” 354.
The First World War was a major media event, and newspapers were committed to “fortifying domestic resolve.” As Indian sepoys fought their King-Emperor’s battles on the Western Front, newspapers and propaganda relayed their exploits to metropolitan audiences in Britain and Germany eager for war news. On either side of no-man’s-land, serial accounts of Indian troops not only buttressed popular support for the war and wartime policy, they reinforced the ideologies of imperial rule. Representations of Indian troops in British and German propaganda reveal a shared repertoire of racial stereotypes and racial hierarchies. Even though the German Foreign Office allied itself with Ghadar, a movement committed to overthrowing the British Empire and regimes of white supremacy globally, it readily deployed racist vitriol in order to rally support for the Reich. Ultimately, propaganda in both Britain and Germany about the exploits of Indian troops at the front intensified racial hierarchies and justifications for Europe’s continued presence in India after the war.

If industrialized slaughter rendered men helpless at times, such was not the version of events as they appeared in Newspapers. From the moment Indian troops first stepped into the trenches at Ypres, newspaper correspondents brought the exploits of India’s martial races home to British audiences, assuring everybody that India’s martial races did not disappoint. Such accounts reproduced tropes used on the Northwest Frontier decades earlier. Indian troops, British audiences read, bravely withstood everything the Germans threw at them. “One of the first [Indian] regiments to go into action was badly shelled while entrenching,” reported The Times on November 5. “An officer who was present

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particularly observed the indifference of the men to this – to them – novel experience. It was noticed that after the first few shells they hardly troubled to look around.” During the second battle of Ypres in late April 1915, *The Times* added,

One incident may be given as exemplifying the steadiness of the Indian Troops. … A battalion of Pathans, after a forced march, was advancing along a road towards the scene of action when a shell burst in the middle of them, killing and wounding 16 men. The survivors did not even break their columns of fours, but simply closed up and marched straight on. They went into action immediately afterwards and advanced across 1,200 yards of open ground under a murderous fire, their war-cry swelling louder and louder above the din.³⁶⁷

Gurkhas very quickly emerged as a favorite of French and British audiences and their skills with the *kukri* practically became the thing of legend. Gurkhas made a habit of “discarding their rifles and kit” at nightfall and, “armed only with their kukris, stealthily set out from the trenches, spreading out in open formation and adopting a system of signaling known only to themselves” to cut down German sentries. “It is with such night attacks that openings are made for the British troops,” *The Times* reported.³⁶⁸ “In battle, the Indian troops were once again covered in glory with the *kukri* of the Gurkhas playing, as always, its terrible role,” reported the French newspaper *Le Siècle* in November 1914.³⁶⁹ In his timely book, *Famous Fights of Indian Native Regiments* (1914), Reginald Hodder wrote: “Given a human mark – let us say in the shape of a German – [the Gurkha] can take off his nose and ear, or pierce his eye with deadly precision.” Yet Hodder assured his readers that Gurkhas were not making a habit of throwing their

³⁶⁷ “In the Poison Belt,” *The Times*, May 6, 1915.
daggers across no-man’s-land: “They would not run the risk of losing the beloved weapon for the sake of killing one German.”

By late November, *The Times* honed in on what was considered a much more “characteristic exploit by Gurkhas.”

The Indian divisions have been engaged. For several days they had to face a terrific assault, and their ranks were daily thinned by a most murderous fire from heavy artillery and machine guns, against which they had little opportunity of showing their prowess in the kind of warfare in which they are most useful – the charge and the stealthy night attack.

Occasionally, however, they have done wonders in this way. A company of Gurkhas had been terribly worried one day by the fire from a certain German trench about 200 yards from their own, at each end of which a [machinegun] was posted. At nightfall they determined to have done with it. Secretly and silently four men left their trench and crept away into the darkness. An hour passed, two hours, three, and nothing happened. Then, just before dawn, came the alarm. There was a sudden cry of terror from the German lines, then mingled shouts and shots. After a minute’s struggle in the dark against an invisible foe, who slashed and stabbed without being seen, the Germans were seized with panic and bolted to the rear. Rifle fire blazed out along the whole front, but the four happy Gurkhas slunk back to their comrades unscathed. When dawn broke the German trench lay untenanted save by the two silent [machineguns] and the gashed and bleeding bodies of 15 of its defenders.

Newspapers marveled at the ability of the Indian soldiers to adapt to what was, for them, the novel circumstances surrounding their deployment to Europe. The Indian soldiers, read one article, “are in a strange country. Their training and their instincts have accustomed them to quite different conditions.” Distinguishing German from French

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soldiers in the dark, the article continued, was not easy for them, and the Indians
“understand no language but their own, and very few others understand that.”372 Despite
the novel and no less horrendous conditions at the front, “The Indian troops have been
greatly distinguishing themselves,” wrote The Times. “They are fighting with an
enthusiasm and dash which have electrified the whole army.”373

Yet the Indian troops were not beyond occasional mishap and tragedy. At
Givenchy, reported The Times, Indian troops attacked German trenches “and captured
them by brilliant assault” only to be caught by surprise when the Germans blew up the
trenches with hidden mines. “Our brave Indians suffered terribly. The enemy, strongly
reinforced, delivered a furious counterattack, pouring in a devastating enfilading fire.”374
When the British began an offensive at Neuve Chapelle on March 10, in which Indian
troops provided half of the attacking force, The Times exclaimed: “We rejoice
particularly that the Indian regiments, which have had some hard usage in previous
encounters, were enabled on this occasion to win new distinction. The ground seized
represents a considerable gain.”375

Newspaper articles headlining the dash and exploits of Indian troops were part
and parcel of a propaganda campaign aimed at reinforcing the ideologies justifying
imperial rule. Even after Indian infantry withdrew from the Western Front at the end of
1915, propaganda intended for British audiences continued to argue that the war had
erased any division between East and West. By way of example, consider the propaganda
film produced by Doctor H.D. Girdwood, “With the Empire’s Fighters.” In 1915, Dr.

Girdwood received permission to take photos and cinema films of the Indian Corps in France. In 1916, Girdwood began editing his reams of film into a single work. The final cut showed a variety of scenes, including the Prince of Wales reading dispatches and examining war photographs, to Gurkhas charging a German trench, field artillery in action, and how Indians spent their leisure time in billets. In 1917, he took his film on tour throughout England. After the war, he showed his film in Canada, the United States, and India to audiences that included members of government, civilians, soldiers and students. Girdwood liked to trumpet his own accomplishments, and hundreds of newspaper clippings and other paraphernalia from his showings are collected in a single file in the records of the India Office. At a September 1917 screening in London, Secretary Chamberlain took the stage to speak to the assembled crowd, noting that although they met in the heart of London, the occasion was really an Indian occasion. The Times reported, Mr. Chamberlain “spoke of the remarkable way in which, at the call of the King-Emperor, the Government, the princes, and the people of India had responded with all they had to offer.”

Another newspaper clipping from the November 23, 1917 edition of the Liverpool Courier read:

“In this part of England we need someone to stir our imaginations and give us some idea of what great things are being done for us and the future generation. Your film has helped us all to realize these things.”

This letter from the Vicar of a Lancashire town, in which socialist propaganda and peace activities are rife in an unusual degree, is one of many striking testimonies which have been received by Dr. H.D. Girdwood of his wonderful war pictures, “With the Empire’s Fighters,”…

376 “A Film of Indian Warriors,” The Times, September 12, 1916.
In India, at the outbreak of the war, enemy activities were particularly rife, and were responsible for a great deal of native unrest. The populace were told that the Indian soldiers were being used as cannon fodder, that they were being hurled at the enemy and slaughtered to prepare the way for white troops. Anyone who knows the Asiatic mind will realize how difficult a task it was to disabuse the people of these mistaken ideas, and it was for this purpose that Dr. Girdwood came over to France with the first men of the Indian Expeditionary Force.\textsuperscript{377}

That same month, the city of Liverpool allowed Girdwood to show his film to all 120,000 children in the Liverpool schools. Afterwards, teachers instructed their students to write response essays. John Slater, an 11 year-old student, wrote: “In pre-war days our Indian soldiers were looked upon merely as picturesque figures by the majority of the English people. This war has drawn East and West together more closely.”\textsuperscript{378} At the St. Paul’s Girls School, “With the Empire’s Fighters” prompted this response from 11 year-old Constance Fletcher:

India is famous. For the courage and bravery her soldiers have displayed during this terrible war. The soldiers are loyal to the Motherland, for all she has done for them, dating back far back, during the growth of the British Empire. They cannot repay her for all her help. That is where the German soldiers made a great mistake. They thought the Indian soldiers would turn traitor to England, but they were faithful and true. One of the famous Indian Princes left the sunny regions of India, and all his earthly possessions, as so many others have done, to fight for the common cause. His age is seventy three, he is no shirker! How brave the Indian Army look, sitting erect on their beautiful prancing horses, with spears in their hands.

The Gurka Regiment, the Sikhs and Jats, have distinguished themselves by their true skill, courage and bravery in the great French battles. We cannot realize the soldiers lives

\textsuperscript{377} \textit{Liverpool Courier}, November 23, 1917.  
\textsuperscript{378} IOR L/PJ/6/1454, File 3569.
of hardship and suffering. An officer who has been to the front (Doctor Girdwood, B.A….) has willingly faced death to obtain a good film, so that the children of the Empire may realize the dangers our men are going through. We saw the Indian soldiers going into action, how fearless and brave they are. We saw the valuable gifts given by the native princes of India, for use in France.

The inspection of Gurka Regiments and weapons, was very interesting, especially the terrible Gurka knives (and) ____ which have filled the Germans with terror and awe.

The Indian soldiers interested us, by the way they cooked their food, and we were amused by their strange customs and manners. It is wonderful how the soldiers have endured the severe weather in France, from the tropical climate of India, and some are being sent back there.

We are none the less impressed by the lecture as by the pictures, which the kind doctor gave us. It taught us a lesson we will not easily forget. May all who saw the pictures, take to heart, and be impressed, by the loyalty and devotion of our soldiers, to the country, and may we all who are not fighting do our share, in helping to bring the war to a successful peace, by economy in food, and every man who is a true Briton, should fight to create in the minds of all the people in the world, a truer friendship, in liberty and Christianity.379

Given the degree to which British and French newspapers reveled in the exploits of Indian troops, it was perhaps only a matter of time before the same stories and racial stereotypes found their way into German newspapers and propaganda. Describing a German attack on Indian trenches in late December 1914, the Norddeutsch Allgemeine Zeitung noted the peculiar Indian penchant for fighting with knives. “The Indian soldiers fought with their bayonets and knives for many hours” and German troops only

succeeded in taking the trenches after suffering many casualties.\(^{380}\) Other German newspapers, like the English language *Continental Times*, mocked the sensationalism prevalent in its London counterpart. “It was telegraphed from London that at the sight of the Indians, the German were struck completely dumb,” read a January 1915 article.

The negroes had dazed them, but these Kipling figured took their breath. They worked wonders in fighting and destroyed the Germans by whole regiments and battalions at a time. What reconnoitering service they performed! How unsurpassed their new methods! They crept forward like snakes and then struck down the German sentries, who did not have time to utter a sound before the crawling heroes had cut their throats with their long knives.\(^{381}\)

But those Indian knives had not always been so admired by English audiences, the article continued. At the time of the 1857 rebellion, “When India wished to shake off the English yoke … then the English considered these knives as a symbol of barbarism and of the most contemptible cunning, as the treacherous weapon of an inferior race against a higher and more civilized one.”\(^{382}\)

In the summer of 1915, the German Foreign Office distributed a pamphlet on the *Employment, contrary to International Law, of Colored Troops upon the European Arena of War by England and France*. Translated and distributed internationally, the pamphlet argued that the “large number of colored troops” from Asia and Africa, “who grew up in countries where war is still conducted in its most savage forms, have brought to Europe the customs of their countries.” The atrocities perpetrated by these people “under the eyes

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\(^{382}\) Ibid.
of the highest commanders of England and France … set at defiance not only the recognized usages of warfare, but of all civilization and humanity.”

Effectively, the German Foreign Office was playing on racial fears shared on both sides of no-man’s-land regarding the deployment of Indian and African men in the heart of Europe. It was one thing for Africans and Indians to conduct war in its “most savage forms” overseas. It was something else entirely for Britain and France to allow colonial troops to bring those customs to Europe to use against Europeans. Documents contained within the pamphlet’s accompanying appendix illustrated “the barbarous behavior of the mercenary colored troops of England and France.” Sworn testimonies of approved witnesses, as well as extracts from the diaries and letters of enemy citizens and soldiers alleged that “colored troops” carry “as war-trophies” the “severed heads and fingers of German soldiers” and wear “ears which they have cut off” as “ornaments about their necks.” On the battlefield, “they creep up stealthily and treacherously upon” wounded German soldiers, “gouge their eyes out, mutilate their faces with knives, and cut their throats.” The Foreign Office also reproduced the particularly insidious trope of hyper-sexualized “natives” raping white women. Behind the lines, the pamphlet read, French commanders knowing full-well the “savagery and cruelty of the colored Senegalese … set these savages to guard innocent [German] women who had the misfortune to be staying in France at the outbreak of the war, and to expose them to their animal passions.” In the “interest of humanity and civilization,” the pamphlet demanded “most emphatically that colored troops be no longer used upon he European arena of war.”

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Claiming that enemy soldiers committed “atrocities” could mobilize audiences at home and win over opinion in neutral countries. As German soldiers marched through the heart of neutral Belgium in August 1914, they set about murdering innocent men, women and children they believed to be dreaded guerrilla fighters known to as *francs-tireurs*. These acts of cruelty provided ammunition for the opening salvo of a propaganda war in which the British maintained throughout that in the face of such overwhelming evidence of German barbarism, they and their allies could rightly claim the mantle of “civilization” in the war. Ninety-three German scholars responded to the charge in an “Appeal to the Civilized World” published in October 1914 in which they contrasted the vigor of Germany’s intellectual life and legacy to the hordes of uncivilized peoples brought to fight in civilized Europe by the British and French empires. One month earlier, in neutral Switzerland, the French pacifist Romain Rolland unwittingly provided the preface to the German argument when he wrote in the *Journal de Genève*:

> And thus the three greatest nations of the West, the guardians of civilization, rush headlong to their ruin, calling in to their aid Cossacks, Turks, Japanese, Cingalese, Soudanese, Senegalese, Moroccans, Egyptians, Sikhs and Sepoys – barbarians from the poles and those from the equator, souls and bodies of all colors. It is as if the four quarters of the Roman Empire at the time of the Tetrarchy had called upon the barbarians of the whole universe to devour each other.

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386 Ibid, 148.
Rolland later offered something of a retraction, noting: “As regards barbarism, I am glad to confess that now the ‘white-skins’ can no longer reproach ‘skins, black, red, or yellow’ in this respect,” adding, “It is not the latter but the former whom I blame. I denounce today once more … the short-sighted policy which has introduced Africa and Asia into the quarrels of Europe.”

In the winter of 1914-15, the German Foreign Office believed that stories about atrocities perpetrated by African and Indian troops could help balance the scales in the contest for opinion in neutral countries. The Continental Times, an organ of German propaganda intended for English language audiences in Europe, accused France’s African soldiers of committing atrocities as early as October 1914. “English papers have been filled lately with stories of alleged atrocities committed by Germans,” the paper read. Yet the London Globe, it went on, had published reports of “deeds of barbarism by the allied black troops of France.” The Globe’s war correspondent supposedly met a Senegalese rifleman, “who wore a necklet of ears, cut off the heads of German soldiers. Another Senegalese showed the blood-covered head of a German Ulan.” An Algerian, meanwhile, was left unattended in a Red Cross train with four wounded Germans. “When the surgeon in command looked through the window some time afterwards, the savage had strangled the four Germans.” The Continental Times protested, “Will moral England protest against such atrocities, which are proved by an Englishman?”

Soon enough, Indian troops found their way into the repertoire. Reporting on “The Indian Idea of War,” The Continental Times noted on December 14, 1914 that Gurkhas “crawl out every night and come back with souvenirs. One night about 1,000 of

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388 See comment in Rolland, Above the Battle, 193-194.
them crawled out with their knives and simply sliced up a lot of the enemy.” England’s reliance on Indian troops, the newspaper asserted, undermined its claims to upholding the mantle of civilization. “Ah, Civilization, how thy name has been polluted!” read a February article in the newspaper.

In the name of civilization, the Allies have, so far, brought into the field; to fight against Christian white races, such types of uncivilized mercenaries, as savage Senegalese, negroes of various wild types, callous heartless Hindus, Sikhs, Turcos, Mongols, Khirgise and other colored and untutored people.

A short poem in a January edition of the newspaper chimed:

My name is Tommy Atkins,  
And I’m a husky chap,  
My comrade is a Cossak  
And my partner is a Jap.

We’re going with some Gurkas  
And likewise with some Sikhs.  
Some black Algerian Turcos  
And other colored treaks.

And with all the bloomin’ virtues  
For which you know we shine:  
We are carrying Civilization  
To the people on the Rhine.

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By the summer of 1915, therefore, the German Foreign office was only reproducing a well-rehearsed argument, adding to it the weight of “only a selection from the comprehensive material at hand illustrating the barbarous behavior of the mercenary colored troops of England and France.” Most of the testimony and documents focused on “atrocities” perpetrated by France’s North African soldiers, yet Indian soldiers were the subject of some particularly blood-curdling accounts. The facsimile of the November 10 diary entry of a French soldier resting behind the lines read: “Once a Hindoo comes along on horseback; he keeps in his feed-bag the ears of “boches sales” (Germans). He takes pleasure in showing them to us Frenchmen, and he is as happy as a god.” A German soldier, Peter Kaas, testified that he witnessed two “Hindoos” rush upon a wounded German during the fighting at Neuve Chapelle on November 2, 1914. They cut out one of his eyes and were about to do the same to Kaas when German soldiers rushed at them suddenly and they fled to the safety of their trenches. An extract from a letter found on a captured Belgian soldier read:

In the last battle we had to beat a retreat at one point in our line. Then with 3 men of my company we got into the camp where the Indian troops were. They took us for Bavarians soldiers, and we owe it only to one of their commanders that we were not massacred. They are veritable savages, men with the most barbarous customs. I have seen with my own eyes Germans massacred. These people cut off the heads of their prisoners as if that were nothing at all.\footnote{Employment, contrary to International Law, of Colored Troops upon the European Arena of War by England and France, Appendices 4, 11, and 13.}

British propaganda deflected German “atrocities” in an effort to maintain both domestic support for wartime imperial policy and neutral opinion. One way it did this was by denying German claims outright and then calling renewed attention
to the atrocities perpetrated by German soldiers. Conceding that colonial troops were
capable of such acts, *Wheaton’s Elements of International Law* (1916) posited: “Whether
semi-barbarous or coloured troops may be used in war against white or civilized races”
depended on the fulfillment of certain conditions. The “employment of savage troops is
illegitimate, if it is certain or highly probable that they will not remain subject to military
discipline, and that they will get out-of-hand and act contrary to the established laws and
customs of war.” Indeed, *Wheaton’s* granted that the “melancholy effects” of using
“bands of marauders and undisciplined troops” had been witnessed in various conflicts,
including the Russo-Turkish war. However, the employment of Turcos by France in 1859
and 1870, as well as the use of “negroes” in the American Civil War “was by no means
unlawful” and demonstrated that such troops could be used responsibly. In the Great War
of 1914, *Wheaton’s* concludes:

> The Turcos and Indian troops were properly employed, notwithstanding the
> remonstrances of the Germans. However, whatever may be said about ‘savage’ and
> ‘barbarian’ troops, the war of 1914 showed that the worst excesses of cannibals and
> scalp-hunting savages seem less atrocious than the many unspeakable horrors perpetuated
> by German soldiers.394

German atrocity propaganda likely undermined German efforts at recruiting the
friendship of Indian elites. M.M. Bhownaggree, a onetime Conservative M.P. elected in
1895, reminded readers in a 1916 pamphlet that the Indian soldiers were the sons of an
ancient and highly developed civilization that was thoroughly disciplined in the methods
of European warfare. “The people of India, from whose proudest races these troops are
furnished,” Bhownaggree continued, “were civilized and cultured long anterior to the

394 Coleman Phillipson, “Use of semi-barbarous troops,” in *Wheaton’s Elements of
period when, according to Julius Caesar, Tacitus, and other Roman writers, the Teutonic savages roamed the German forests.” With Indian claims to civilization firmly secured, Bhownaggree went on to highlight the recent track record of German soldiers who had “massacred in cold blood and extirpated the tribe of Herreros” a decade before the war, and who had perpetrated “harrowing acts of cruelty in … the present war.” Such atrocities, Bhownaggree concluded, will “for ages to come” make Germany’s name “a by-word at the mention of which humanity will quail.”

While there was not likely any truth behind the allegations of the German Foreign Office, German frontline soldiers internalized many of the racial stereotypes found in propaganda about Indian troops. The November 1 diary entry of a German POW captured by the Indian Corps at Festubert in 1914 offers this:

Party sent out to fetch food for the men in the trenches, twice forced to return empty by rifle fire from all sides. Warned to be very careful in watching Indian troops who were said to be very cunning in creeping up to German position.

German soldiers also believed stories about the prowess and ferocity of Gurkhas in hand-to-hand combat. One Second Lieutenant in the 114th Regiment, in trenches outside Givenchy in November 1914, wrote, “It is furthermore often reported that the Indians sneak up to our trenches like animals with their long knives. Then they attack and slaughter our people with those knives.”

Drawing on a sample of German soldiers’ letters and diaries, Christian Koller has demonstrated that some Germans were quick to

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397 TNA WO 157/597, continuation of report on documents found on prisoners (112th Regiment) captured on November 23, 1914.

398 PAAA R21077, letter from Leutnant Schniewind, January 13, 1915.
denigrate Indian soldiers – as well as African – with a repertoire of racist stereotypes. He offers this extract from a letter written by the volunteer Kurt Schlenner, an undergraduate from Berlin who wrote to his parents in December 1914 that racial diversity weakened any sense of *Kameradschaft* in the British and French trenches: “Everybody will first look whether an emerging comrade is from the same tribe as himself. One cannot respect a Negro as a comrade after all.”

It is difficult to determine if racist stereotypes about Indian soldiers can account for some of the high casualties suffered by the Indian Corps. German missionary Paul Walter, working in Lille with captured Indian soldiers, wrote to the Foreign Office in December 1914 dismissing any notion that the sepoys terrified German troops.

Reports in the English press claiming that the Indian troops spread fear and terror among our troops are, of course, complete fantasy. You will soon see that the [recently captured] soldiers belonging to the 9th Bhopals are no devils.

Indeed, during the famous Christmas Truce of 1914, German soldiers invited soldiers belonging to the 2/3 Gurkhas and the 39th Garhwal Rifles to participate in the impromptu festivities. Brigadier P. Mortimer serving with the Garhwal Brigade wrote in his diary:

The enemy came out of their trenches yesterday (being Christmas day) simultaneously with our fellows – who met the Germans on neutral ground between the two trenches and exchanged the compliments of the season – presents, smokes & drinks – some of our fellows going into the German trenches & some of the Germans strolling into ours. …

The above happened in front of the 2/3 Gurkhas & Garhwal lines. … The Leicesters our

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400 PAAA R21244, letter from Paul Walter to the Foreign Office, December 7, 1914.
only British Regiment in the Brigade were unfortunately in Reserve so could not participate.\textsuperscript{401}

Further consider an interesting episode described in Ernst Jünger’s memoir when, in the summer of 1917, he and some of his comrades captured three wounded Rajputs. The Indians threw themselves at the feet of their captors and begged for mercy. It was the Indians, Jünger recalled, who “seemed to be convinced that we would massacre them.”\textsuperscript{402}

And yet there remains reason to suspect that racist stereotypes about Indian troops, intensified by atrocity propaganda emanating from the German Foreign Office, did contribute to higher Indian casualties. German soldiers captured by the Indian Corps in November 1914 testified that at a time when there was “a general hatred of Great Britain throughout Germany,” carefully nursed by propaganda, a special order had been issued to soldiers “to treat Indian prisoners with special consideration, for political reasons.”\textsuperscript{403} Feldwebel Braun of the German 112\textsuperscript{th} Regiment relayed that a Regimental Order from October 28 stipulated that “Hindu” prisoners were to be well treated, but that Englishmen were to be killed rather than captured. Command issued another order in early November 1914, he claimed, restating the policy.\textsuperscript{404} By early 1915, however, Walter believed that many German troops flagrantly disregarded these orders and showed Indians no quarter. Such behavior, he worried, could undermine his and the efforts of the Indian Independence Committee to win over the loyalty of the sepoys. Western Command of the German Army had Walter write a booklet in early 1915 to allay German

\textsuperscript{401} IWM P253, The First World War Diary of Brigadier P. Mortimer, entry for December 26, 1914. Also see the reference in Charles Chenevix Trench, The Indian Army and the King’s Enemies 1900-1947 (Thames and Hudson, 1988), 39.
\textsuperscript{402} Ernst Jünger, Storm of Steel (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 149-150.
\textsuperscript{403} TNA WO 157/597, report on the examination of Vice-Feldwebel Braun, 112\textsuperscript{th} Regiment, taken prisoner on the evening of November 23, 1914.
\textsuperscript{404} Ibid.
fears about the ferocity of Indian troops and stress the political and military value of Indian prisoners of war for Germany. Still, by the end of 1915, at a time when the British could confirm that only several hundred Indians had been taken prisoner by the Germans, 3247 remained categorized as “missing.” The question of whether racist stereotypes contributed to higher casualties in the Indian Corps merits further investigation.

The Germans, for their part, alleged British racism was responsible for the high casualties suffered by Indian troops. The Continental Times featured an editorial in February 1915 reminding readers that the English, who refused “to travel in the same railway car with a colored person and treat that entire race with unutterable contempt,” had already pressed some 200,000 “heathen mercenaries” into service “in her effort to destroy the Christian civilization of Germany.” Just as shameful, according to the newspaper, was the “conduct of the British officers in pushing these unfortunate Asiatics and Africans in the front of the battle line.” The appalling losses of Indian and African troops in northern France and Flanders, “as compared to those of the supporting English, gives substantial evidence that John Bull is true to his old traditions in utilizing other races to do his hard fighting.”

Later that month, The Continental Times included a piece by the Swedish explorer Sven Hedin who called it a “crime to import those poor Indians into Europe in winter” where they merely froze to death in the trenches. The article posited:

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406 Merewether and Smith, Indian Corps, 459.
Is it a sign of progress in culture and civilization worthy of the 20th century, to drag these guileless Hindoos thousands of miles across sea and land, to drive them into the firing lines on the battlefields of Europe against the first soldiers of the world[?] Such action is the acme of cruelty. Cruelty, not against the German soldiers, for I knew their sentiments towards their Indian adversaries: Contempt and Pity!  

British propaganda quickly rebutted allegations that British commanders were using Indian troops as cannon fodder. The Times reported in November 1914 that high Indian casualties were the result of German racial attitudes and policy:

Letters found upon wounded men or prisoners make it clear that the German military authorities have specially charged their troops with the task of inflicting the severest possible punishment upon forces whose civilization they deny and whose soldierly qualities they affect to disparage.  

Another article in April 1915 stated that interviews conducted in India with returned officers and the wounded “prove beyond a shadow of doubt that on the battlefield European and Indian troops are employed on a footing of absolute equality.” The Times continued: “The report that the Indian troops had been placed in front of English is an absolute lie. The public must beware of believing false rumors.”

And yet the rumor persisted, as this chapter demonstrates in the next section.  

Suffice to say for now that propaganda and newspaper articles about Indian troops in

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410 “Treatment of Indian Troops,” The Times, April 15, 1915.
Britain and Germany intensified a shared repertoire of racist stereotypes. These stereotypes, in turn, reinforced the ideologies of imperial rule. While newspapers like The Times rallied domestic support for imperial wartime policy, the propaganda film of Dr. Girdwood groomed the next generation of British imperialists. In Germany, propaganda directed by the Foreign Office alleged that British commanders gave sepoys free-reign to commit the most ghastly atrocities. These allegations may have informed the behavior of German frontline troops when confronted with sepoys. Whether racism contributed to higher Indian casualties remains to be determined.

War News on the Indian Homefront

The war on the Western Front affected places distant from the actual fighting. Audiences in India were no less inundated with news of the war than were audiences in Europe. The main suppliers of war news were the sepoys themselves, who wrote harrowing accounts of their experiences at the front. The British and Germans understood that what was said to audiences in India could make or break Britain’s hold over the Subcontinent. British authorities called upon the resources of Britain’s global empire in order to monitor and control the kind of war news available in India. While the British did not withhold news about the troops per se, they did try to downplay India’s contribution to the military situation in France and Belgium. Punjabi newspapermen, meanwhile, offered their own versions and interpretations of events on the Western Front.

during the First World War,” Journal of Contemporary History 34 (Oct., 1999), 517-536; and Koller, “The Recruitment of Colonial Troops in Africa and Asia.” After the war, George MacMunn argued that British commanders, by means of their callous disregard for the lives of their men, treated all soldiers, British and Indian alike, as cannon fodder. See: MacMunn, Martial Races, 323-4.
While newspapers and penny pamphlets in England trumpeted the exploits and heroics of Indian troops, British commanders hoped to convey a somewhat different impression in India. In January 1915, General Willcocks wrote to General Headquarters, “Judging from certain correspondence, some of the Indian troops already entertain the idea that they are the chief people who really make a stand against the Germans.” That winter, he discovered that many soldiers had sent letters home, written on paper supplied by the Order of St. John of Jerusalem including a seal depicting Britannia with the Union Jack protected by three Indian soldiers, a Sikh, a Gurkha, and a Pathan.

   Anything better calculated that the device in question to spread this erroneous notion it is
difficult to imagine. It is, therefore, desirable that the Order of St. John of Jerusalem be
induced to adopt some other unobjectionable device.412

At the Indian Base Post Office, meanwhile, E.B. Howell asked that Willcocks supply him with lists of “the regiments which have not particularly distinguished themselves.”

   Especially if any regiments are to be sent back to India, & rumor is very strong that this
step is contemplated, I think their letters should be examined with special care.413

In June 1915, Field Marshal French warned that authorities needed to do more to counteract the effects of seditious propaganda in France. “It may be taken as certain that the enemy is trying to undermine the loyalty of the Indian troops, and is fomenting any discontent that may exist amongst them,” he wrote to the War Office. French suggested that the India Office initiate various measures to “combat this poison”: one set to deal with the root of the problem in India, and another to deal with the spreading of seditious propaganda in France. In addition to awarding more decorations to the troops in France,

412 IOR L/MIL/7/18920, General Willcocks to General Headquarters, January 12, 1915.
413 IOR L/MIL/17347, from E.B. Howell, January 11, 1915.
the Field Marshall wanted the British to make every effort in India to circulate accounts of the gallant actions performed by Indian troops. French advised, however, against giving Indians the impression that the sepoys were bearing the brunt in Europe. “Thus reports of heroic deeds by British and Allied troops, the cinematographs showing the power of the allied forces are fully as important as those which show the achievements of Indians.”414 While Dr. Girdwood spent the war years busily showcasing for metropolitan audiences as young as 11 the wisdom of imperial policy and the heroics of Indian troops, the message authorities hoped to impress on India differed considerably.

The India Office collaborated in this endeavor by suppressing propaganda that, it believed, made too much of India’s contribution to the war effort in Europe. In 1916, Lieutenant Edward Long began collaborating with the publishers Messrs. Hodder & Stoughton to write a book dealing with the part played by Indian soldiers in the war. “It would take the form of gallant deeds, performed by Indian soldiers, and would be published possibly in Urdu, as well as in English, for circulation in India, as well as here, and in neutral countries,” he wrote to Sir Arthur Hirtzel in the India Office in June.415 There was a catch, however: Hodder & Stoughton were only willing to publish the book on receipt of a letter from the India Office promising to purchase no less than 10,000 copies at a price of 8d. per copy. Hirtzel considered the price too high and chose not to support the project: “What are we to do [with 10,000 copies]? In the case of ‘India & the

414 IOR L/MIL/7/17517, Field Marshal French to War Office, June 22, 1915.
War’ the Office gave £150 and received 1500 copies. We had great difficulty in making an appropriate distribution … we returned 250.”

Yet internal memos from the India Office reveal that the high cost of Long’s project was not the only concern. “Neither from a military nor from a political point of view does it seem desirable to encourage exaggerated ideas of Indian valor, which is certainly the effect which a book devoted entirely to the subject would have,” reads one.

To judge from the vernacular press, & from the censors’ reports in France, there is already no lack of self-esteem, & to separate the ‘black pepper’ from the ‘red pepper’ – to use a metaphor common in letters from Indian soldiers – may give further currency to the belief that most of the fighting has been done by Indians. A book of brave deeds done by British & Indian troops in the proportion of about 3 to 1 would do no harm.

Long attempted to proceed with the project despite the absence of India Office support. Hitzel and his associates did not let Long slip out of contact, however, and tried to persuade him “that the scales be held evenly between Moslem & non-Moslem troops, & especially that the achievements of white troops – be kept well to the front, so as not to create a false perspective.” Unable to obtain the records he wanted from the India Office or the Foreign Office concerning deployments and actions of the Indians at the front, Long dropped the project entirely in March 1917.

Thus while propaganda in the metropole made sure to highlight India’s contribution to the war effort in France to the effect of, in John Slater’s words, drawing “East and West together more closely,” authorities tried to make sure that propaganda intended for Indian audiences did not overplay the contribution of India’s fighting men.

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416 Ibid, India Officer internal memo, June 22, 1916.
When the Indian Central Publicity Board (CPB) received a film, “Our Great Indian Fighters” anonymously in 1918, William Vincent at the CPB wrote to the India Office from Simla in October that he considered the film “unsuitable for circulation in India and likely to have a somewhat deterrent effect upon Indian recruiting.”

Although the British tried to frame the message Indian audiences received about the war, they were not the major supplier of war news to India. Between 1914-15, letters from Indian soldiers at the front satisfied that role. By March 1915, Indian soldiers in France were writing upwards of 20,000 letters a week addressed to India and another 2000 to 5000 a week to soldiers in the other expeditionary forces fighting around the globe. At the same time, no fewer than 10,000 letters arrived every week from India for the soldiers fighting in the lines.

The war on the Western Front, they wrote, was the epicenter of a great global conflict. “Every king in the world is fighting,” wrote a Sikh to his friend in Raiwind. A wounded sepy wrote to his uncle in India:

A day will come when England and France, and Belgium and Russia, and Italy and India and Canada – so many kings are on the English side – will make an attack on Germany.

Before May there will be a charge, and the charging host will rush like a dust-storm. No man will count their numbers, so great will be the battle line. Then there will be peace.

Even sepoys serving in other theaters understood that the fighting on the Western Front was of a different sort. A sepoys serving in the 29th Punjabis in East Africa wrote to a relative in the 47th Sikhs in France: “From what I see in the papers you are busy fighting...

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419 IOR L/PJ/6/1557, note from William Vincent in the Indian Central Publicity Board to India Office, October 30, 1918.
420 IOR L/MIL/17347, note by the Censor, March 20, 1915.
421 IOR L/MIL/5/825/1, from a wounded Sikh to a friend in Raiwind, January 15, 1915.
422 IOR L/MIL/17347, from a wounded Sikh in England to his uncle in India, March 5, 1915.
all the while and have no time to write. You who are serving in France have got a fine
chance. Do your duty bravely for your King.”

“I am very sorry that I could not stay in
my beloved regiment the 1/9th Gurkhas,” wrote a Nepalese soldier stationed in Singapore
in late January. “If I had not left it by this time I too should have been joining in the
battle, as our forefathers did. Keep your courage. We are chhatris & fighting is our
business.”

Accustomed to skirmishes on the Indian frontier, battles on the Western Front
were like nothing sepoys had encountered before. A Muslim soldier wrote to a friend in
India on February 9:

In the world there could never have been such a war before nor will there be again. It is
sad that God who has so much power and who sent the flood should have brought such a
day to pass. He has given [the Germans] such a spirit that it cannot be described. He has
made them fowls of the air, dragons of the earth, and poisonous crocodiles of the sea, and
He has given them such skill that when we encounter their deceitful bayonets they set
light to some substance which causes a suffocating vapour and then they attack. … If
God enables me to see my people again I shall look upon it as a new life.”

Battles in France and Belgium were unmatched in both their scale and their ferocity. A
soldier serving in France wrote to a shopkeeper in Peshawar on March 7:

My regiment went into battle one day and the Germans took four hundred prisoners.
Another time only two hundred came back alive and the Germans took many prisoners,
dead, wounded and living. One day the Germans made an attack and came upon us.

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423 IOR L/MIL/17347, from a sepoy in the 29th Punjabis in East Africa to relative in the
47th Sikhs in France.
424 IOR L/MIL/5/825/1, from a Nepalese Gurkha in Singapore.
425 IOR L/MIL/17347, from a Muslim sepoy to a friend in India, February 9, 1915.
Thousands of Germans were killed and we took 200 prisoners alive. At every two steps a German lay dead.\textsuperscript{426}

Without discounting the skill of the Germans, Indian soldiers maintained that they were more than a match for the enemy. One soldier told a friend in India,

> The fighting goes on fiercely & both sides are losing very heavily. But their losses are greater than ours. The Germans were very strong, but as soon as the Indian troops arrived their strength was broken.\textsuperscript{427}

A Sikh wrote to his wife in the Punjab in February 1915:

> Now I have seen the war I am very pleased. When we met the enemy hand to hand my heart exulted. The enemy suffered great loss & has now retreated. On our side are six kings: against us there is but one. How then can the enemy win?\textsuperscript{428}

The letter of a Hindu student in England to a soldier in France noted this same general impression.

> I am proud of the bravery & courage with which our soldiers are fighting at the front. Aren’t you? The people of this country have now realized that India is a part of the Empire, not only a part of the Empire, but the right arm of the lady, & great enthusiasm prevails throughout.\textsuperscript{429}

Soldiers wrote particularly vivid accounts when it came to describing major victories. After the Battle of Neuve Chapelle in March 1915, a soldier belonging to the 41\textsuperscript{st} Dogras wrote to a friend in India,

\textsuperscript{426} IOR L/MIL/17347, from a sepoy in France to a shopkeeper in Peshawar, March 7, 1915.
\textsuperscript{427} IOR L/MIL/5/825/1, from a Muslim of the Punjab to a Sikh friend in India, February 3, 1915.
\textsuperscript{428} IOR L/MIL/5/825/1, from a wounded Sikh to his wife in the Punjab, February 2, 1915.
\textsuperscript{429} IOR L/MIL/5/825/1, from a Hindu student in England to a friend in France, January 28, 1915.
During this last week the fighting has been very severe. For three days there was a big attack. The Germans lost a great deal. 700 were made prisoners, officers and men, and many were killed. We have taken many of their trenches. We have also lost a great deal, but we have had a good victory.430

A Sikh officer wrote to his father, an honorary magistrate of the Lahore District, Punjab, since the 10th we have been engaged in a great battle. At first the enemy were in some places two hundred yards from us, in others three hundred, and in others one hundred yards, and over against them we were. We killed them and they killed us. … In these last two days our people have driven the enemy far back and have taken about 3,000 prisoners. … The enemy are now very frightened. When our men without a thought for their own lives and in loyalty to our dear Government reach the enemy’s trenches, the Germans in fear throw down their rifles and come running towards us with their hands up.431

Still, the soldier felt that the newspapers had failed to convey the Indian victory to audiences. “It is a pity that while our army has been doing such fine work, fighting against cold and water, and causing great loss to the enemy, the newspaper men have slept and have said nothing at all about it.”432

And yet, E.B. Howell at the Censor’s Office noticed that many letters written during the Indian Corps’ first winter in the trenches “betray undeniable evidence of depression.”433 The winter of 1914-15 was particularly cold, souring the mood of all of the men huddled and shivering in the trenches of the Western Front – European and Asian alike. “We are much distressed by the rain and the cold and the snow,” wrote an

430 IOR L/MIL/5/825/2, from a soldier in the 41st Dogras to a friend in India, March 17, 1915.
431 IOR L/MIL/17347, from a Sikh officer to his father, March 13, 1915.
432 Ibid.
433 IOR L/MIL/5/825/1, note from the Censor.
Afridi serving in France in March 1915. The mud of spring did not offer much of an improvement in living conditions. “It rains every day. So far I have not seen the sun. There is deep water in the trenches, and the men all stand in the water.” Some soldiers in France expressed their regret at having joined the army in the first place. “You told me not to join the army, but I paid no heed to your words,” wrote a Punjabi Muslim to his father. “Now I regret this bitterly.”

In light of the staggering loss of life suffered at the front, it should come as no surprise that death very quickly became a – if not the – defining topic of soldiers’ letters home. “It is the great war,” wrote a Garhwali from the front to a friend in India in January 1915. “Day by day 2000 men are killed.” A sepoy serving with the 57th Rifles who wrote home on March 19 put it this way: “Here maize is roasted in an oven. Some of the grains are burst asunder & some remain only a little cracked.” A wounded Gurkha wrote, “The Indian troops have suffered terrible losses. … Our Gurkha regiments have suffered great loss.”

No doubt soldiers wrote about death to satisfy a basic human need to process the terrible brutality of the war. Yet Indians also wrote about death because that is what their friends and relatives asked about. “When you write say that so many walnuts have fallen from the tree, and we shall understand,” wrote a Pathan Afridi sepoy in Hong Kong to a friend serving in France in January 1915.

434 IOR L/MIL/17347, from an Afridi serving in France to a friend at home, March 1, 1915.
435 IOR L/MIL/17347, from a Muslim of the Punjab to his father, February 2, 1915.
436 IOR L/MIL/5/825/1, from a Garhwali, January 1915.
437 IOR L/MIL/5/825/2, from a sepoy in the 57th Rifles, March 19, 1915.
438 IOR L/MIL/17347, from a wounded Gurkha to a friend serving in India, January 22, 1915.
439 IOR L/MIL/17347, from a Pathan sepoy in Hong Kong to a friend serving in France, January 22, 1915.
Enduring such an onslaught was a trying ordeal, and some soldiers lost any hope that they or their comrades would return home alive. “I have no confidence of being able to escape [death],” wrote one wounded soldier in January. “In a few days you will hear that in our country only women will be left. All the men will be finished here.” A wounded Garhwali wrote to a relative in India only days after the fighting at Neuve Chapelle in March 1915:

Our regiment has made a great name for itself and its bravery has been published. But what will happen later in the war I do not know. … The English will win, but the Indian troops will be finished first.

“I am now about to return to the trenches,” wrote a Sikh at the front to his father in India shortly after Neuve Chapelle. “There is no hope that I shall see you again for we are as grain that is flung a second time into the oven, and life does not come from it.” One Rajput from the Punjab put it simply: “This is not war. It is the ending of the world.”

Some Indian soldiers suspected that the British were using the sepoys as cannon fodder to spare the lives of white soldiers. One sepoy serving at the front with the 107th Pioneers wrote to another sepoy in India describing the recent battle at Neuve Chapelle. The English, he said,

… put the black men in front and the second line is of white soldiers. Of complete regiments only 400 or 200 are left. We black men suffered heavily. They put us in front.

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440 IOR L/MIL/17347, from a wounded sepoy to a relative.
441 IOR L/MIL/17347, from a Garhwali to a relative in India, January 15, 1915.
442 IOR L/MIL/17347, from a Sikh to his father, March 17, 1915.
443 IOR L/MIL/17347, from a Rajput to a relative in India, January 29, 1915.
444 IOR L/MIL/5/825/2, from a sepoy at the front, March 23, 1915.
The same sepoy also wrote to a retired Indian officer of the 128th Pioneers in India on March 23: “When the Brigade attacks, the Gurkhas and Sikhs go first and the white troops are put in the second line. No one asks about the dead.”

Staggering Indian casualties easily amounted to an indictment of the entire British Raj, in other words, an opportunity too good for German propaganda and Ghadar revolutionaries to overlook. In late December 1914, Hormus Kersasp and Basant Singh of the Indian Independence Committee received permission to take photographs of Indian soldiers killed at the front. Zimmermann in the Foreign Office planned to distribute these photographs for publication in Indian presses in the United States and Asia. The letter of a Sikh in Hong Kong to his brother, sent with reinforcements to the 58th Rifles in France in December 1914, bears all the hallmarks of Ghadar influence.

I am very anxious about you, for if the regiment is sent to the war it will be a very bad business. You know nothing about it. For those regiments which have stayed in India know nothing. They do not know how grievously the English are oppressing them. … The truth is that the German Badshah is a very great hero. I cannot tell you how many men he has killed. He has sunk many ships and done great damage. I have heard that many men of the 15th are dead. Only a few are left. All are dead. Every regiment that goes (to battle) he destroys. … We hear that the German Badshah will win. The German Bahshah said ‘I will not fight with the people of the Punjab. I shall fight with the ‘Topiwalas’ ['people who wear hats', i.e. Europeans]. Doubtless this was true, but when the Punjabis came to fight what could the unfortunate man do, but kill all the regiments? He

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445 IOR L/MIL/5/825/2, from the same sepoy to an Indian officer in the 128th Pioneers in India, March 23, 1915.
446 PAAA R21076, Zimmermann to the Chief of the Army General Staff, December 29, 1914.
has done great damage. And, my brother, what do they give you? Eleven Rupees, all told.

It is a shame. The white soldiers get 100 or 80 or 70 rupees.\textsuperscript{447}

Other soldiers fighting in France dissuaded their friends and family from enlisting. “Teja Singh and Sundar Singh have been killed by bullets. Ladda Singh has been wounded by a bullet in the leg,” wrote a wounded Sikh in January to his father in the Punjab. “My advice to you is that you must not allow any of our people to enlist. For think this over.” Describing the devastating effects of artillery, he said:

Here … four or five men are killed by one ball. – Some of the balls weigh ten mauds [300 pounds]. The corpses lie as thick as the jungle. With one shot we kill 20 or 25 of them and they do the same with us.\textsuperscript{448}

Other soldiers made it clear that all they really wanted was to return home in one piece. “Have the Holy Quran read through for me,” wrote a Pathan serving in France to a friend back home. “I do not mind death, but this is a very evil place. No respect is paid to the dead. There is no release from death, and one day we must all die. But at least let us die in our own country.”\textsuperscript{449}

Although the Punjab did not boast literacy rates on par with those of the European powers fighting on the Western Front, Indian audiences were no less anxious for war news. Newspapers complained early on about the lack, or unreliability, of information provided by government sources. The \textit{Zamindar (Lahore)} complained in early October 1914 that after learning of the landing of Indian troops in France, Indian audiences had heard nothing.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[447] IOR L/MIL/17347, from Jiwan Singh in Hong Kong to his brother in the 82\textsuperscript{nd} Punjabis, December 27, 1914.
\item[448] IOR L/MIL/17347, from a wounded Sikh to his father, January 22, 1915.
\item[449] IOR L/MIL/17347, from a Orakzai Pathan to a friend in his own country, February 26, 1915.
\end{footnotes}
We admit that it would be inadvisable to publish the movements of the Indian troops. But surely we are entitled to hear of their doings. Surely the relatives of the Indian soldiers on service should be made acquainted with the latter’s welfare or otherwise. Some means should be adopted whereby such news could be given.\textsuperscript{450}

The \textit{Jhang Sial} (Lahore) complained, “It is impossible to see any consistency in the war news.” Sometimes, Indian audiences learned of great victories. The next moment, they learned of tragic defeats. “The ordinary man is thrown into a state of confusion. He is at a loss to know what to believe.”\textsuperscript{451}

Indian audiences also wanted soldiers at the front to be able to stay informed about events at home. The \textit{Desh} (Lahore) requested that the British government make every effort to supply soldiers with vernacular newspapers to enable the sepoys “to keep in touch with what is happening in their own country, so that the loyalty displayed by their countrymen might prompt them to show greater zeal and ardour in the war.”\textsuperscript{452}

As war news contained in soldier letters and official releases circulated through the recruitment districts, Indians responded in various ways. News of a fallen loved one was perhaps the worst one could receive. The \textit{Prabhat} reported in 1915,

\begin{quote}
A widow, aged 20 years, of Bhingot (Dharamsala, Kangra District) has committed suicide. Her husband, Onkar Singh, Rajput, died in the war. It is not known how many more incidents like this will happen next.\textsuperscript{453}
\end{quote}

British recruiters noticed a greater resistance to enlistment. In the Amritsar district, heartland of Sikh recruitment, one recruiting officer noted in November 1914 that wives and mothers had taken to following recruiting parties for miles to dissuade their menfolk

\textsuperscript{450} IOR L/R/5/195, \textit{Zamindar}, October 8, 1914, p. 931.  
\textsuperscript{451} IOR L/R/5/195, \textit{Jhang Sial}, October 9, 1914, p. 943.  
from enlisting.\textsuperscript{454} As the world war expanded in 1915, the demand for Indian manpower increased. Authorities demanded 13,490 men from the Punjab in 1914. The following year, the number of recruits they required shot up to 45,776.\textsuperscript{455} Captain Howell in the Censors’ office in France understood why it might be difficult for recruitment officers to fill their quotas. He wrote in April 1915: “Now that the accounts of the hardships which the Indian troops have had to undergo during the winter in France are circulating freely in India, it may be expected that there will be a marked drop in recruiting for the Indian Army.” He added, “this is not without its advantages,” though neglected to mention what those might have been, only writing that “no attempt has been made here to suppress the very large number of letters from the front and from the hospitals in France and England in which the writers dissuade their relatives from enlisting.”\textsuperscript{456}

Howell’s laissez-faire approach to censorship alarmed the Viceroy who, in June 1915, pointed out that recruitment had fallen off considerably. During April and May of that year, 10,397 recruits were enlisted compared with 14,201 during February and March. “We attribute the recent decrease in a large measure to harvest operations but there is reason to believe reports from the front and the return of the wounded men may have also contributed to the falling off.”\textsuperscript{457} The Viceroy added: “It is probable that we shall not get sufficient recruits to meet our requirements with the present inducements.” In early June, the Government of India telegraphed the Indian Base Post Office in Boulogne to say that “it is most undesirable that such passages in letters should be

\textsuperscript{454} Tan Tai-Yong, “An Imperial Home-Front,” 383.
\textsuperscript{455} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{456} IOR L/MIL/17347, Censors’ Report, April 24, 1915.
\textsuperscript{457} IOR L/MIL/17347, copy of telegram from the Viceroy to the India Office, June 24, 1915.
allowed to pass and it would be well in the future to erase all such remarks when found or to suppress letters containing them if unavoidable.”458 The Viceroy added: “If our Indian forces are to keep the field, we must recruit far more quickly than at present and we are doing all we can to encourage recruiting.”459

For some newspapers, the war shattered the illusion of Western superiority and Europe’s claim to the mantle of civilization. On August 8, 1914, the Zamindar (Lahore) wrote, “War was denounced by Europe as barbarous and opposed to the spirit of civilization: but now we see every nation of that continent rushing headlong into it. So much for her peaceful pretensions.”460 The Hindu (Lahore) chimed in a note headed “May God save us from such civilization” on September 22, 1914:

> Europe claims to be the champion of civilization; she claims to bring peace and good will among men. And yet we see this very Europe engaged in the most bloody war ever known in the world’s history. If this be the civilization of which Europe boasts, may it never be our lot to have such civilization.461

 Appropriately, Punjabi newspapers and Indian audiences expressed deep reservation, even alarm, about the conduct of European soldiers on the battlefield – German soldiers most notably. The Khalsa Sowak (Amritsar) stated that the very idea of a German victory, and of India trading British rule for German, was abhorrent. It wrote that the Germans’ “barbarous cruelty has been seen in their treatment of their colonies and of the French and Belgians in the war.”462 Before Indian troops even reached

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459 IOR L/MIL/17347, copy of telegram from the Viceroy to the India Office, June 5, 1915.
460 IOR L/R/5/195, Zamindar, August 8, 1914, p. 793.
Marseilles, the *Paisa Akhbar* (Lahore) called attention to a rumor that German soldiers had cut the heads off some Gurkha and Sikh sepoys and then sent them to English commanders, protesting the use of Indian soldiers in the war.\textsuperscript{463} In Lahore, the *Dipak* proclaimed, “Indians, tender-hearted as they are, have been greatly moved by German atrocities in Belgium and they shrink from setting eyes on the German demons.” At a fair in early November 1914 at a temple in Mohan Lal Ganj Tahsil, Lucknow District, a *sowar* proclaimed that the Germans had massed on the Indian frontier. The news so frightened the assembled masses “that all the villagers ran away in great haste, and the women were so overcome by fear that they ran away leaving behind them their children, their ornaments and a good deal of other property.”\textsuperscript{464}

Indian newspapers harnessed the atrocities perpetrated by (white) German soldiers in order challenge racial hierarchies and prejudices within the British Empire. In Lahore, the *Tribune* wrote in early 1915,

> If there is one fact more than another which emerges from the war, it is that a large portion of the German nation – white people, *par excellence* – live on an ethical level with the Huns and possess the moral evils of the Zulus and the Mami. That is the plain English of the doctrine of ‘frightfulness.’ The inhuman atrocities in Belgium and France proclaim to all the world the downfall of all theories of inherent moral pre-eminence of the white race.\textsuperscript{465}

Yet contradictory rumors about the conduct of German soldiers were just as commonplace. In September 1914, the *Jhang Sial* (Lahore) reported on another rumor flying through the bazaars. This rumor held that the Germans,

\textsuperscript{464} IOR L/R/5/195, *Dipak*, November 12, 1914, p. 1014.  
when faced by a British and an Indian regiment, refused to fight against the latter, though they did so against the former, on the plea that the Indians were friends of Germany. Of course we do not consider this rumour worthy of credence. Surely the Germans do not consider Indians their friends when they are fully aware that Indians are ranged against them in this war.\footnote{IOR L/R/5/195, \textit{Jhang Sial}, September 22, 1914, p. 881.}

In light of the atrocities perpetrated by Europeans, the exploits of Indian soldiers erased any lingering doubt about India’s fitness for a better place within the British Empire. The \textit{Paisa Akhbar} proclaimed:

There can be no doubt but that our soldiers, by their undaunted bravery, have won for themselves and for India an imperishable fame. Their casualties may be heavy; but the reward is rich. Sir James Wilcocks has written to His Excellency the Viceroy and pointed out the invaluable service rendered by Indian soldiers during the Boxer Rising in China. Such deeds as these will win for India the honour she deserves among the nations of the world.\footnote{IOR L/R/5/195, \textit{Paisa Akhbar}, November 13, 1914, p. 1034.}

The First World War affected places distant from the actual fighting. In India, war news contained in sepoy letters created some palpable tensions in the imperial relationship. Soldiers relayed news of victories, of course, but death quickly became the main theme of soldier letters. Some sepoys implored friends and family not to enlist. British authorities worried what Indians might do with news suggesting that Indian soldiers bore the brunt of the fighting in Europe in order to spare the lives of white soldiers. As the Punjab’s nationalist press editorialized the war in order to dismantle the Empire’s racial hierarchies, the stories sepoys told about the fighting on the Western Front made it more difficult for recruiters to keep the Indian Army supplied with fresh bodies.
Conclusion

Imperial dynamics and inter-imperial rivalry profoundly shaped the experiences of the Indian soldiers fighting in France. As we saw clearly in the case of the 23 Afridi soldiers who deserted to German trenches, British and German policy also created spaces where Indian soldiers could display remarkable degrees of agency. The letters that they wrote and the letters that they received further reveal the interconnectedness and codependency of places distant from the fighting on the Western Front. Through 1915, Indian soldiers remained central to British military strategy in France and Belgium. As newspapers and propaganda in Europe fortified metropolitan resolve for wartime imperial policy, Indian soldiers participated in creating their own narrative, one that had profound implications beyond the confines of the battlefield. For the commanding generals on the Western Front, the fate of the British Empire rested on the performance and experiences of its soldiers in battle. As a discursive topic, Indian soldiers could pay imperial dividends well beyond the reaches of the battlefield. By the close of 1915, the war news circulating in India strained British efforts to sustain active support for the war. The Empire required something that might undo the devastation caused not only by its own strategy of attrition, but the telling of terrifying war stories. Thus, it is to the hospitals behind the lines in France and England where doctors worked to heal the traumas of war that we now turn.
Chapter Three
Hospital

The war on the Western Front marked a significant departure from previous wars in a number of respects. Notably, it was the first conflict in history in which disease was not the number one killer of human beings. Between 1914-18, high explosive shells claimed that title. Owing to recent and remarkable advances in medicine, wounded soldiers not only stood a decent chance of surviving their wounds, but many could expect to return to the front upon recovering. And many of those sustained repeated bodily trauma. Yet while a vast literature on the experiences of soldiers at the Western Front describes death, killing and various manifestations of mourning, medicine in the Great War and wartime cultures of healing remain understudied. This is problematic because history’s first “total war” produced both implements of mass destruction as well as institutions of mass healing. We might even say that destruction and repair were the two central experiences of the war. Jeffrey S. Reznick demonstrates that hospitals were critical parts of the British war machine. At a most fundamental level, hospitals sustained manpower by repairing damaged bodies and returning soldiers to the front. Hospitals also functioned as sites of propaganda and played a key part in sustaining popular support for the war. “Praise of hospitals as models of efficiency, economy and comfort shared a common root with propaganda that sought to mask the horrors of wartime life” from audiences at home, Reznick argues. Hospitals also provided “a means

468 Jeffrey Reznick, Healing the Nation: Soldiers and the culture of caregiving in Britain during the Great War (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2004).
by which those who remained at home could ‘do their bit’ by expressing appreciation of those who were serving King and Country overseas.”

Between 1914-18, the British established segregated hospitals for wounded Indian soldiers in France and England. This chapter argues that these hospitals were not benign institutions of healing. Like hospitals that repaired the bodies of English soldiers, Indian hospitals played a crucial role in sustaining the war-making capacity of the British Empire. Indian hospitals in Marseilles or Brighton also served an imperial purpose. As sites of propaganda, they reaffirmed the ideologies of imperial rule for audiences at home, abroad, and within the hospital wards. Yet even while the British Empire succeeded to a considerable extent in exploiting the manpower of India, this chapter demonstrates that wounded sepoys were rarely ever mere pawns on the imperial chessboard. Hospital authorities were committed to two policies: returning sepoys to the front, and protecting white prestige. Wounded sepoys found ways of resisting both. In this way, Indian hospitals readily became what British authorities hoped they would not: spaces where imperial subalterns contested the policies and ideologies of imperial rule. This chapter first looks to the establishment and day-to-day functioning of the Indian hospitals in France and England. While doctors repaired the bodies of Indian soldiers, hospital authorities crafted an elaborate imperial spectacle, one meant to revive the martial spirit of the troops. Sepoys were not entirely immune to this propaganda. Yet through various forms of everyday resistance, many avoided returning to the front. Next, the chapter highlights ways in which hospital administrators called upon both metropolitan and Indian resources in order to strengthen popular support for the Empire.

469 Ibid, 43.
at home. Newspaper and magazine articles about the Indian hospitals reproduced the ideologies of imperial rule and reminded home audiences to do their bit for the Empire. At the same time, hospital authorities imposed a strict regime of racial segregation to protect the Empire’s hierarchies. Finally, this chapter looks at what was actually said about the Indian hospitals to audiences in India. The British succeeded to some extent in framing the message, but they could not control entirely the content of Indian soldier letters. Some of the stories told by shattered and traumatized soldiers made it far more difficult for British recruiters in the Punjab to carry on their business as usual. In this way, Indian soldiers in Europe compelled the British to reformulate imperial policy in India.

**Healing the Empire**

In Anand’s *Across the Black Waters*, the sepoys first encounter the war’s wounded while waiting at a train station to go to the front for the first time. From the smell of medicines spreading from the trains at the adjacent platform, the sepoys knew that they were full of wounded soldiers. “And there was a grim silence,” among the Indians,

only broken here and there by the loud oaths of a sepoy who had suddenly awakened and

had not yet become aware of the necessity for calm, till almost the whole train-load of

sepoys was spellbound. The men stared as if fascinated by a chimera that had been

conjured up in their heads by the smell of blood and drugs.

After some time had passed, one of the men at last found the courage to ask his neighbor: “Where do they come from?” “From the war, of course,” was all he got in reply as the rest of the men remained transfixed on the medical trains in vain hope for a
glimpse of the wounded. With none to be found, the men could only smack their tongues and wave their heads in sympathy, “screwing their faces and spitting the while, because the smell of iodine and disinfectants spread thicker than in the wards of any hospital in the cantonment where they had been sent during bouts of malaria or for medical inspection or inoculation.”

Soon enough, the smell of blood, iodine and disinfectants became all too familiar for the Indian soldiers fighting in Europe. This section demonstrates that Indian hospitals responded to the desperate need for manpower at the front by healing damaged bodies and by producing propaganda for the wounded soldiers intended to revive the commitment of sepoys to winning the King-Emperor’s battles. Doctors and hospital administrators succeeded to some extent, but many convalescent sepoys successfully avoided returning to the front. In so doing, they revealed that they valued a safe return home above and beyond winning the war in Europe.

In the decades leading up to the First World War, as medical science made one breakthrough after another, health and healing became central to the project of Empire. Medical institutions, knowledge and treatment fortified white imperialists as they ventured into the African bush or Asian jungle. Doctors and medical personnel, meanwhile, made conquered peoples known to their conquerors. The medical experts that worked with indigenous peoples also played an important role in the construction and ordering of imperial hierarchies. Recruits to the medical service in India came almost

470 Anand, Across the Black Waters, 63-64.
471 Alison Bashford, “Medicine, Gender, and Empire,” in Levine, ed., Gender and Empire, 112-113.
exclusively from upper-class backgrounds. They were privileged, Oxbridge-educated, and conservative.\textsuperscript{472} Just as important to the construction of the Empire’s racial hierarchies, the women who worked as nurses and the men who worked as doctors were always white.\textsuperscript{473} The practices that guided the profession of healing and medical recruitment in Europe’s overseas colonies followed Indian soldiers to Europe in 1914.

Indeed, no one could deny the incredible need for medical experts from the very outset of the First World War. The Indian Corps started taking a significant number of non-fatal casualties from the very moment British commanders deployed them piecemeal into the trenches outside Ypres in late October 1914. On October 26 and 27, stretcher bearers carried 240 men of the 15\textsuperscript{th} Sikhs to the rear with nasty shrapnel wounds received before the regiment was even properly entrenched. Their comrades in the Jullundur Brigade fared only slightly better during the week of October 24 through November 1. In that relatively short span, the 59\textsuperscript{th} Rifles lost 189 men to wounds, and the 47\textsuperscript{th} Sikhs lost 120.\textsuperscript{474} The sepoys fought almost nonstop that following month. By the start of December, 3915 Indian and British soldiers in the Meerut and Lahore Divisions had to be removed from the lines because of their wounds. By the close of the year, that number had risen to 5860. Nearly one out of every four sepoys who landed at Marseilles in late September and early October had sustained some manner of physical trauma in just three months of fighting.\textsuperscript{475}

\textsuperscript{474} Merewether and Smith, \textit{Indian Corps}, 49.
\textsuperscript{475} Ibid, 199.
The year 1915 started slowly for the Indian Corps, but the rush of mangled bodies to field hospitals in the rear renewed in earnest in March. In the span of three days during the Battle of Neuve Chapelle, 38 Indian officers and 1720 sepoys sustained wounds. The rest of the year witnessed a somewhat slower, albeit steady stream of wounded bodies. By the close of the year, after fourteen months in the trenches, some regiments were almost entirely depleted of their original contingent. Fighting at First and Second Ypres, Givenchy and Festubert reduced the original contingent of the 129th Baluchis to four British officers, five Indian officers and less than two-dozen of the other ranks. During that time, 2547 Indian soldiers served in the 129th. Of those, 944 sustained wounds. Casualty figures for the entire Indian Corps offer a grim portrait of the realities of frontline duty during the First World War. By the close of 1915, Sir James Willcocks counted 28,800 total casualties among the Indian Corps, British and Indian soldiers and officers included. A recount after the war increased that figure to 34,252.

As Indian soldiers fought in the trenches in late 1914, British authorities sent their wounded comrades by rail to improvised hospitals scattered throughout France. In France, large hospitals were established at Boulogne in a converted Jesuits’ College and at Marseilles in a large camp and at the adjacent Chateau Mussôt. Smaller hospitals included a converted hotel overlooking the sea near Hardelot and a military school at Montreuil that took in an especially large number of wounded Indians belonging to the

476 The Action Taken by the Indian Corps in The Battle of Neuve Chapelle March 10th to March 13th 1915 (Simla: Government Central Press, 1915), 28
477 Farwell, Armies of the Raj, 253.
478 Willcocks, With the Indians in France, 324.
479 Cited in Jack, “The Indian Army on the Western Front,” 329.
Lahore Division during the fighting at Festubert in December 1914. There was also a large camp for wounded Indians at Rouen attached to the military depot, although it closed in the spring of 1915. Authorities established a clearing hospital in Lillers. At St. Venant, the British acquired a woman’s insane asylum to be used as a convalescent depot where soldiers spent no more than a fortnight before going back to the fighting line.480

Towards the end of 1914, prompted by French protests that the railways could not accommodate the large number of Indian wounded, Lord Kitchener appointed Sir Walter Lawrence as Commissioner of Indian Hospitals and charged him with the task of finding suitable homes for wounded Indians in England. By the start of the First World War, British medical theory held that climate affected different peoples differently: to be “out-of-place” was a medical problem, one that produced or prolonged ill-health.481 Throughout the British Empire, racism combined with medical science to justify policies of exclusion and segregation.482 Thus, Lawrence maintained that the challenge “was to get the Indians quickly into warm and dry buildings, as they suffer greatly from a wet and cold climate, and it was essential to concentrate in one or two localities.”483 Lawrence believed that wounded British soldiers “could be sent to any part of the kingdom.” But Indian soldiers presented a unique logistical challenge, “owing to their special requirements,” and Lawrence insisted they “must be kept together.” The Commissioner

480 TNA WO 159/17, letter from Sir Walter Lawrence to Lord Kitchener, December 31, 1914.
482 Harriet Deacon, “Racism and Medical Science in South Africa’s Cape Colony in the Mid- to Late Nineteenth Century,” Osiris 15.1 (2000), 190-206.
scoured southern England for any location with the infrastructure to accommodate a
diverse array of Indian customs and religious practices. In Brighton, Lawrence succeeded
in obtaining the Royal Pavilion, the York Place Schools, and a block of buildings that
became known as the Kitchener Hospital. The Lady Hardinge and the Forest Park Hotel
opened as hospitals at Brockenhurst. He also secured sites for hospitals in Netley,
Bournemouth, and Milford-on-Sea, and a convalescent home at Barton-on-Sea, New
Milton.\footnote{See: Rozina Visram, \textit{Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History} (London and Sterling,
Virginia: Pluto Press, 2002), 180-192.}

When it came to the task of saving lives and repairing damaged bodies, Indian
hospitals provided excellent medical care. In part, this was because the British
transported wounded soldiers from the front to hospitals quickly. For example, during the
three days of fighting at Neuve Chapelle in March 1915, the hospital at Boulogne
received 750 serious cases in 24 hours.\footnote{TNA WO 32/5110, Lawrence to Kitchener, April 30, 1915.}
By March 19, 474 of those cases arrived at the
Kitchener Hospital at Brighton.\footnote{TNA WO 95/5465, War Diary of Kitchener Indian Hospital, Brighton, January 1915
to January 1916.}

From its opening in December 1914 through
November 1915, over 2000 patients passed through the Royal Pavilion. By the time they

To be sure, the system never worked perfectly. Lawrence intended that the worst cases
should go to England while lighter cases would remain in France. “When the rush comes – and in the
case of Indians it has always been a rush – they [the French] put them on ship because
they have no provision for sifting them at Boulogne,” he explained in a letter to
Regardless of where they were admitted, Indians enjoyed superior medical facilities and treatment. The converted Jesuit College in France admitted 19,858 patients, of whom only 223, or 1.16 percent, died. The Kitchener Hospital in Brighton admitted 3890 cases. Only 26 soldiers died from wounds, a mortality rate of .75 percent. “It is correct to say that the same care which is given to the British wounded has been extended to their Indian comrades,” Lawrence observed. “The arrangements are the same as those made in British Military Hospitals, which are of course very superior to those obtaining in Military Hospitals in India for Indian troops.”

Just as medical healing in the colonies before the war always serviced imperial ends, the primary function of Indian hospitals in France and England was not simply to heal, but to repair damaged bodies so that sepoys could return to the front. “The great preoccupation of the officers [working at the hospitals] was to heal and to render the men fit for the fighting line,” Lawrence wrote, “but they knew that beyond the physical healing much depended on the mentality of the Sepoys.” In addition to providing space for exercise and light drill, hospital authorities offered sepoys various amenities to make their convalescence as quick and pleasant as possible.

Every effort was made to keep them cheerful and to provide the simple comforts, which mean so much to the Indians. … the Indians knew that every precaution had been taken to insure that his caste scruples would be respected. Caste committees were appointed in each hospital … Every facility was given for religious observances … The fast of Ramazán was duly kept.

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488 TNA WO 32/5110, Lawrence to Kitchener, March 22, 1915.
489 TNA WO 32/5110, report by Lawrence, March 8, 1916.
490 TNA WO 32/5110, Lawrence to Kitchener, December 15, 1914.
491 TNA WO 32/5110, Report by Lawrence, March 8, 1916.
492 Ibid.
At the Pavilion Hospital, nine different kitchens catered to the different dietary requirements of the Indian soldiers. At the Kitchener Hospital, there was a large recreation room where hospital personnel projected scenes of Punjab life “to a delighted audience of soldiers from the north of India.” At the convalescent depots, gramophones regularly played “the native airs of India.” In December 1914, Lawrence made arrangements with the India Office to ensure that letters sent from India to the wounded men would arrive and for the distribution of a vernacular newspaper to the patients.

Providing such comforts and amenities, alongside excellent health care, was an imperial effort. Most Royal Army Medical Corps officers who controlled the administration of the Indian hospitals had served in India earlier in their careers. In London, Gandhi organized the Indian Field Ambulance Training Corps and recruited 198 Indian students studying in England at the outbreak of the war to work as orderlies, dressers, and interpreters in the hospitals. Additional staffers were recruited from as far away as Peshawar, Bombay and Poona. Meanwhile, the India Office made a special effort to obtain ingredients like dal and ghee for all of the hospitals. Lawrence wrote to Kitchener in December 1914:

I have taken the line that in all matters involving Indian knowledge the India Office should be called upon to advise. I have placed the responsibility on the India Office of suggesting the names of Indian Medical Officers who should have control of the various hospitals. All questions referring to food, religion, and caste are similarly referred to them.

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493 Visram, Asians in Britain, 181.
495 TNA WO 32/5110, Lawrence to Kitchener, December 15, 1914.
496 Visram, Asians in Britain, 171-172, 181.
497 TNA WO 32/5110, Lawrence to Kitchener, December 14, 1914.
But the British Empire required more than just soldiers with healthy bodies: the empire needed soldiers who were loyal and wanted to fight. Wounded sepoys received a steady barrage of propaganda geared towards this end. For example, Lawrence made sure that news of important victories made its way into the hospitals. “The result of the Neuve Chapelle fighting has been very remarkable,” he noted in late March. “When I communicated the news to the patients at Brighton they received it with delight and it had a marked effect on their spirit. I have never seen a greater change in my life, and now that the wounded and sick have arrived, the change is still greater.” Elaborately staged visits from imperial notables were a common occurrence. On August 25, 1915, the King visited the Royal Pavilion Hospital and in an elaborate investiture ceremony on the lawn of the hospital, 1000 wounded Indians gathered to witness eleven of their comrades receive decoration for gallantry in the field.

In June 1915, Lawrence was alarmed when he discovered, “In the Sepoys’ letters there is constant mention of the fact that the ‘black pepper’ is being used up and the ‘red pepper’ is being saved; in other words that the Indian troops are being deliberately sacrificed and the British troops preserved.” Lawrence attributed this phenomenon to the fact that “the Indians in Hospitals only see the Indian wounded and never see the British Hospitals; and in England, in towns like Brighton and Bournemouth, they see a large number of Civilians whom they all regard as young men of military age.” Lawrence worked quickly to remedy a potentially damaging situation by impressing upon the

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498 TNA WO 32/5110, Lawrence to Kitchener, March 22, 1915.
499 See the account in The Brighton Corporation, A Short History in English, Gurmukhi and Urdu of the Royal Pavilion Brighton and a Description of it as a Hospital for Indian Soldiers (Brighton: King, Thorne and Stace, 1915).
wounded Indians that thousands of British soldiers shared a similar fate and were also recuperating in hospitals.

From some rough figures which I got regarding the affair at Neuve Chapelle I am of the opinion that it could be shown that the British have suffered more heavily than the Indians. I have not yet received the statement which I asked for, but it would be very valuable to obtain figures showing the proportion of casualties in the British Army and the Indian Army.500

Given what was at stake, hospital authorities kept a close eye on visitors who might undermine the spectacle they were trying to put on for recuperating sepoys. “There are so many political agitators, Indian and English, that one has to walk warily,” Lawrence observed in December 1914.501 When the Raja of Kapurthala paid a surprise visit to the hospital at Marseilles, hospital authorities made sure that he remained accompanied by a British officer at all times. “He asked many questions about the food of the Sikhs,” Lawrence reported. “The answers to these questions were satisfactory, but if he had been allowed to go round the Camp unescorted, his questions might have led to trouble. Strict orders have now been given … and any visitors of this character, if allowed in the Camp, will be very carefully watched.”502

In his letters to Kitchener, Lawrence emphasized repeatedly that the hospitals sent a satisfactory number of soldiers back to the lines. In March 1915, Lawrence wrote: “We return from the Convalescent Depot [in England] 57.48 per cent to the fighting line, and invalidate back to India 42.52 per cent.”503 In May, the Kitchener Hospital boasted that of

500 TNA WO 32/5110, Lawrence to Kitchener, June 15, 1915.
501 TNA WO 32/5110, Lawrence to Kitchener, December 15, 1914.
502 TNA WO 32/5110, Lawrence to Kitchener, April 30, 1915.
503 TNA WO 32/5110, Lawrence to Kitchener, March 22, 1915.
1359 total admissions, 414 men had already been returned to the front.\(^{504}\) By June, the hospital’s commander assured the India Office: “Out of 2600 cases treated here I have already returned 900 to duty; and every effort is made to get men out as quickly as possible.”\(^{505}\) After repeated outbreaks of disease at the convalescent depot in Rouen sent many recently healed sepoys back to hospital beds, Lawrence ordered the hospital closed. “I am convinced from what I have seen and from what I have heard from the Sepoys that Rouen is not the place for Indians,” Lawrence wrote to a colleague in March 1915. “They speak of it as a ‘shaitan ka jagah’ and a place of ill luck.” Marseilles, in contrast, provided a much more accommodating climate. “The one thing needed to bring the Indians round, and to turn a convalescent man into a cheerful fighting man, is sunshine,” Lawrence maintained.\(^{506}\) In Marseilles, “The atmosphere is Indian – there is sunshine – the supply depot is close at hand, and they cost less to feed here than at Rouen.”\(^{507}\)

Yet despite their best efforts, hospital authorities conceded that they could not heal many of the psychological traumas that soldiers suffered at the front. When Lawrence noticed that wounded men of the 15\(^{th}\) and 47\(^{th}\) Sikhs arriving in England in December 1914 appeared “somewhat morose,” the best he could do was to recommend that “the men of these Regiments who come to England should be divided as much as possible among the various Hospitals.”\(^{508}\) By May 1915, Lawrence noted,

> There are a very large number of what are known as trench cases where men have been crushed by the falling in of the trench dugouts. The men are buried under a heavy weight

\(^{504}\) TNA, WO 95/5465, war diary of Kitchener Indian Hospital.

\(^{505}\) TNA, WO 95/5110, letter from commandant Kitchener Hospital to India Office, June 24, 1915.

\(^{506}\) TNA WO 32/5110, Lawrence to Kitchener, March 10, 1915.

\(^{507}\) TNA WO 32/5110, Lawrence to Sir Neville, March 3, 1915.

\(^{508}\) TNA WO 32/5110, Lawrence to Kitchener, December 15, 1914.
of clay, and it seems to crush them physically and morally. They are very difficult cases to treat.  

After repeated attempts to treat what was in all likelihood undiagnosed post-traumatic stress, Lawrence and his colleagues conceded there was nothing they could do but provide the men with a bed on board a hospital ship bound for India. “The medical view is there is only one thing to do for a trench back, and that is to invalide the man to India.”

Sepoys also found various ways of feigning illness in order to delay their return to the front. Lawrence identified many cases of malingering at the Indian hospitals in both England and France. One soldier of the 126th Baluchis put red pigment in his urine. “Others,” Lawrence noticed, “became deaf on arriving in Europe.” During one hospital inspection in early 1915, the Commissioner encountered four Sikhs of the 3rd Sappers and Miners. When Lawrence asked the medical officer what their illness was, he learned, “They were not ill, but their C.O. had sent them away with one remark ‘debility.’”

Owing to the rigor of their work, hospital authorities very likely overlooked many similar cases. Other times, sepoys came to the rescue of a comrade who had been found out. One Pathan in the 58th Rifles recuperating in a hospital in England in March 1915 wrote to his friend still with the regiment in France:

Sikandar Shah has come here too. I have made through enquiry from him. He told me that a man of the 57th came & our people asked how Inzar Gul was. He replied that Inzar Gul himself had hit his own hand. Then the Doctor caused him to be arrested, saying

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509 TNA WO 32/5110, Lawrence to Kitchener, May 27, 1915.
510 TNA WO 32/5110, Lawrence to Kitchener, June 15, 1915.
511 TNA WO 32/5110, Lawrence to Kitchener, March 3, 1915.
“You have caused your own injury.” There was another sepoy with him who said “I saw him hit”, i.e. he gave evidence in his favor. Then the Doctor let him go.\(^{512}\)

Hospital authorities had to overcome more open resistance from soldiers who did not want to return to the front. At the convalescent depot at Milford-on-Sea, sepoys complained “that it was not fair to send them back to the trenches until other fresh regiments from India had been sent to the front.”\(^{513}\) As early as February 1915, Lawrence noted a growing consensus among the soldiers that “the pay of an Indian Sepoy is not sufficient remuneration for the work which they have been called upon to do in France.”\(^{514}\) At the Pavilion Hospital, authorities removed an Indian medical student when they discovered that he had been telling the soldiers “that it was a wicked thing to send them back to the fighting line, and that they were fools to go on their present pay.”\(^{515}\)

“Briefly,” Lawrence wrote, “I think that the Indian point of view is this,”

that if an Indian is wounded or falls sick on campaign, then it is his right to go back home. My impression is that in the Afghan War, when I saw something of operations on the Kurram and the Khyber lines, a wounded man usually found his way back to India, and there was no question of his returning to his regiment. … Another thing I have noticed, and that is that directly a man leaves his regiment and gets away to the Base Hospitals in France or in England, he begins to forget his regiment and to remember very vividly his home.\(^{516}\)

\(^{512}\) IOR L/MIL/5/825/1, Pathan Afridi in the 58\(^{th}\) to a friend in the regiment, March 14, 1915.
\(^{513}\) TNA WO 32/5110, Lawrence to Kitchener, February 15, 1915.
\(^{514}\) Ibid.
\(^{515}\) Ibid.
\(^{516}\) TNA WO 32/5110, Lawrence to Kitchener, March 10, 1915.
Lawrence recommended that the Government of India consider increasing the monthly salary of all Indian soldiers fighting overseas. Authorities agreed, and increased the soldiers’ monthly pay from 11 to 19 rupees.

Despite the increase in pay, the flow of sepoys returning to frontline duty slowed to a trickle as 1915 wore on. Sometime in late May, hospital personnel received secret orders that “no wounded sepoy would be sent back to his Regiment unless he volunteered to go.” Lawrence, who only learned of the change in policy after the fact, believed that the order undermined the hard work of the administrators and medical staff at the hospitals. “There are a great variety in the wounded cases,” he told Kitchener. “But owing to the skill and devotion of the [Indian Medical Service], many severely wounded men have been rendered medically fit to return to the firing line.” Since the Battle of Neuve Chapelle, Lawrence had noted that the “spirit of the men in hospitals had greatly improved, and that they genuinely wished to get back to the fighting line.” The new policy changed everything.

The sepoys in the French hospitals know now that some such order has been given, and I am of the opinion that very few wounded men now will volunteer to return to the firing line. There is a form of trades unionism in India, and any man who volunteers to go back will be regarded as a black-leg by his comrades who, for various reasons, do not want to go back.\footnote{TNA WO 32/5110, Lawrence to Kitchener, June 15, 1915.}

At the advance base in Boulogne on May 22, only 30 out of 249 wounded sepoys volunteered to return to their unit. On June 2, a mere four soldiers from another batch of 71 recently healed men agreed to return to the front.
Lawrence further conceded that despite the best efforts of the hospital personnel, no amount of medical attention or propaganda could undo the desire of sepoys to return home. “The further the sepoy gets away from his adopted family the regiment, the more he longs to get back to his own family,” he noted in August 1915. The steady stream of bad news soldiers received from India only frustrated further Lawrence’s efforts to return men to the front. “The Sepoy,” Lawrence wrote in December 1915, “is frankly a mercenary.” The soldiers “make large remittances to their families, and many of them save quite a considerable amount of money, but prices in India have been very high, bullocks have died owing to the drought, and many of them have sustained heavy losses at home.”

One wounded soldier wrote:

That enemy plague has laid low my whole family and I am out of my mind and all my friends have forgotten me. Out of my three households only my brother’s wife is left. My three brothers with their children are dead, my younger uncle is dead with his children, and my elder uncle and the rest of the brothers’ relatives have suffered much. Well, no man can fight against our merciful God, and now my friend, I only am left. How can I manage three households? My own Commanding Officer is not here before whom I might complain. The officers are strangers and will not listen.

At the Indian hospitals, Lawrence and his colleagues repaired damaged bodies in order to sustain manpower at the front. While excellent medical care coupled with propaganda succeeded to a considerable extent, doctors conceded that some of the traumas sustained by soldiers at the front remained beyond their ability to heal. Other sepoys stymied British policy by finding ways to avoid returning to the front. Through everyday forms of resistance, sepoys subtly and not-so-subtly challenged imperial policy.

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518 TNA WO 32/5110, Lawrence to Kitchener, December 27, 1915.
519 TNA WO 32/5110, quoted in letter from Lawrence to Kitchener, December 27, 1915.
and imperial rule. In so doing, they made it clear to their caretakers at the hospitals that they were not mere pawns on the imperial chessboard. Yet Indian hospitals served purposes beyond just those of military efficiency. As sites of propaganda, they could also reinforce the ideologies of imperial rule for British audiences. It is to this facet of the Indian hospitals that this chapter now turns.

Wounded Sepoys for the British Homefront

Newspaper and magazine articles called on British readers to show their appreciation for India’s loyal contribution to the war effort by donating time, money and other articles to the wounded sepoys. At the same time, the popular press reproduced racial stereotypes about India’s martial races, portraying the sepoys as content with a social order imposed by the British. These representations of wounded Indians and of Indian hospitals masked a much more sinister underside of the British Empire’s healing industry. In order to impress upon sepoys and working class women the “proper” place of Indian men in the Empire’s racial hierarchy, hospital administrators imposed a strict regime of racial segregation. At times, this priority – racial segregation – undermined the first priority of Indian hospitals, which was to return as many sepoys to the front as quickly as possible.

The establishment of hospitals in France and especially England sparked a flurry of articles in metropolitan newspapers urging British audiences to “do their bit” for the sepoys. Reporting on the decision to bring sick and wounded Indians to England on October 20, 1914, The Times noted that apart from the practical benefits offered by the arrangement, “it will give us added opportunities of showing in practical form our
appreciation of India’s enthusiastic cooperation.”\textsuperscript{520} As British audiences sent gifts to the wounded Indians arriving on their shores, hospital administrators used the forum of the newspaper to encourage them to continue doing so. “I have received numerous inquiries from people who are anxious to send gifts to the wounded Indian soldiers as to what gifts would be most suitable,” wrote E.H. Sharman, Officer in Charge at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Netley. With warm clothing and cigarettes in ample supply, the C.O. requested fresh and dried fruits, stationery, and envelopes. “I feel sure that the public will make a generous response to this letter, and in this small way show their gratitude to those brave defenders of the Empire.”\textsuperscript{521} Even Gandhi published a letter in \textit{The Times} urging Indians living in England to offer their services as orderlies and nurses, adding: “In my humble opinion it ought to be our proud privilege to nurse the Indian soldiers back to health.”\textsuperscript{522}

In order to encourage giving, metropolitan newspapers fed British audiences sanitized versions of the inner workings of the hospitals. “Should anyone be disposed to regard a visit to our Indian sick and wounded as something sad and unpleasant to be faced for duty’s sake it would be well to assure him at once that – in the Brighton Pavilion at least – he will be most agreeably surprised,” reported \textit{The Times} in January 1915.

Pain, of course, is to be seen – and ugly wounds, and fine young men reduced to crawling cripples; but still the general note is cheerfulness and hope, and a full measure of that brave, quiet patience which is the crowning virtue of the East.\textsuperscript{523}

\textsuperscript{520} “Wounded Indian Troops for England,” \textit{The Times}, October 20, 1914.
\textsuperscript{521} “Gifts for Wounded Indians,” \textit{The Times}, November 10, 1914.
\textsuperscript{522} “The Indian wounded,” \textit{The Times}, November 5, 1915.
\textsuperscript{523} “A Visit to Brighton Pavilion,” \textit{The Times}, January 2, 1915.
Postcards distributed by the Corporation of Brighton showed anything from convalescent Pathans posing for a group photograph to soldiers playing cards on the Pavilion grounds. Such postcards offered reassurances of the sepoys’ “cheerfulness and hope” and “quiet patience.”

Britain’s wealthy elite outdid one another by donating some of their largess to the war effort. The Lady Hardinge Hospital at Brockenhurst, supported by the Indian Soldiers’ Fund, boasted the Queen as its President. In February 1915, the hospital hosted a party of Duchesses, Countesses, Earls and high-ranking officers. *The British Journal of Nursing* reported on the visit in its March 6 edition. The article revealed as much about the workings of the hospital as it did about the impressive credentials and beneficence of those who worked at and donated to the hospital. The party arrived at the hospital in a number of automobiles and began their tour promptly. The hospital, they learned, consisted of a series of huts and contained 500 beds and was “beautifully situated on rising ground in the New Forest, the site having been generously presented” by a wealthy patroness of Brockenhurst. They were especially taken with the hospital’s commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Perry, former Principal of the Lahore Medical College and “one of the most distinguished medical men in India.” In the hospital’s twenty wards, each equipped with twenty-four beds, the recovering native soldiers “looked very smart as well as warm in the beautiful dressing-gowns sent by Lady Rothschild, of dark blue cloth with red facings, and one noticed a new use for the knitted scarves, which were ingeniously worn in more than one instance as turbans.”

The article made a point not to omit that beds could be endowed in the hospital and added further: “The Committee of

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524 “The Lady Hardinge Hospital, Brockenhurst,” *The British Journal of Nursing*, March 6, 1915, 185.
Ladies of the Order have done no finer piece of work than the formation of the Indian Soldiers’ Fund Sub-Committee. The total gifts received by it now amount to some £124,000.\textsuperscript{525} Contributing to the Indian hospitals, it seemed, could also secure the social standing of Britain’s elite.

Indian hospitals also provided home audiences with the opportunity to visit a sterile version of the Orient without actually having to step foot beyond the shores of England. At the Lady Hardinge Hospital, the British visitors noted that the hospital beds “have quilts of Turkey twill which suit the dark faces above them.” On the locker at each bedside, the hospital’s visitors found a lotah, “or drinking vessel; those for the Mohammedans being made of aluminum, and those for the Hindus of brass.” The hospital’s two kitchens, “one for the preparation of Mohammedan and the other of Hindu food,” were a flurry of activity. “We saw busy black hands deftly moulding the dough of which the chupratis are made,” the article read, “rolling it into the thin cakes so familiar to those who have lived in the East. … Rice boiled so that every grain was separate, a process rarely achieved in this country.”\textsuperscript{526}

The Royal Pavilion at Brighton generated a fair deal of attention in this regard. Once the late-eighteenth century seaside home of the Prince of Wales, hospital administrators and propagandists considered it especially well suited as a hospital for wounded Indians. A short history on the Royal Pavilion published by the building’s caretakers, the Brighton Corporation, boasted that the Pavilion’s main attraction was the

\textsuperscript{525} Ibid, 187.
\textsuperscript{526} Ibid, 187.
Dome, “a lofty, spacious building of beautiful proportions.” A balcony and galleries ran around the whole interior, stained glass windows studded the roof, and chandeliers – each with hundreds of electric lights - hung around the circumference. “The Dome with its fine proportions and rich colouring now mellowed with age would form at all times a good subject for a painter’s brush, and a specially striking one now when filled with wounded Indians,” the pamphlet read. An architect who had studied in India had designed the rest of the palace and “with its domes and minarets the Pavilion might have been designed as an Indian palace.” The decorations throughout the Pavilion, “were Eastern in style … on a scale of lavish splendor, and in many places the walls were painted with designs and scenes from Oriental legend. These decorations still exist and the preservation of them added no little difficulty in the conversion of the buildings into a Hospital.”

Stories of British officers visiting the hospital wards reinforced an imperial social order: caring white officers in command of grateful Indian subalterns. In December 1914, an Indian Army officer wrote a letter to the editor of the Times in which he appealed to his comrades to visit the Indian wounded in England. “I went especially to see the men of my own corps, who, needless to say, were very pleased to meet someone whom they knew,” he assured readers.

It was very striking how pleased everybody was to have a chat in Hindustani and how eager all were for news of any sort, but more especially with regard to their own particular corps. I venture to write this because I am sure there must be many Indian

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527 The Brighton Corporation, A Short History in English, Gurmukhi & Urdu of the Royal Pavilion Brighton and a Description of it as a Hospital for Indian Soldiers (1915), 3.
Army officers in this country who would be very pleased to go down there if they only knew what happiness it gave to the poor wounded.\textsuperscript{528}

The aforementioned article in \textit{The British Journal of Nursing} described “the intense pleasure” of two native officers of the 6\textsuperscript{th} Cavalry at the hospital upon “once more meeting their former officer” during the tour.

It was typical of the cordial relations between the British officers and their subordinates and no one seeing the light on the dark faces when spoken to by one of the visitors whom they had known formerly in India could fail to realize the strong tie which unites them.

Newspaper representations of the wounded Indian soldiers also reproduced the contradictory tropes that dominated their frontline reporting. At one moment, an article might describe the wounded Indians as “spoilt children” who took the opportunity of an interview to complain to reporters: “‘Sahib, tell the mems [nurses] to learn Hindustani.’ – just like a child who expects to be amused and resents conversation which he cannot understand.” Then only a few lines later, the same article relayed that a native officer of cavalry said that the Germans were not good soldiers: “they have good big guns, Sahib, but when we get near they kneel and fold their hands.” The officer added with “manifest regret” that “the sahibs told us to spare a few.”\textsuperscript{529}

Above all, newspaper coverage of the Indian hospitals emphasized that however much shrapnel might have mutilated the bodies of the Indian soldiers, their loyalty to the Empire remained steadfast. When the King visited wounded soldiers in France in December 1914, he spent 40 minutes in the wards of Indian soldiers. “A visit from their Padshah and personal talk with him is the greatest event that could happen in the lives of

\textsuperscript{528} “The Indian Wounded,” \textit{The Times}, December 2, 1914.
\textsuperscript{529} Ibid.
these loyal men,” the Times assured audiences. “The King was impressed by the extraordinary hardihood and patience with which these men bear their wounds.”

The work done by hospital administrators and staff gave newspapers occasion for imperial self-congratulation. The staff at the Kitchener Indian Hospital in Brighton, reported the Times, “has had strenuous days and nights, and this body of men of the I.M.S. has accomplished a remarkable feat since its arrival in England about the middle of January.” Faced with the task of renovating buildings intended for a union, the Times continued, “In very short time it had made a hospital, ready for military patients and equipped in the latest and completest fashion.” At the Kitchener Hospital, over 1,000 bullet and shell wounds had been examined with the X-rays. “Naturally,” readers learned, “the conduct of a hospital for Indian wounded is a much more complicated business than the conduct of a hospital for Europeans.” The hospital had to meet demand for two supplies of drinking water, two ways of killing meat, and had to provide three kitchens. “The results are worth the trouble,” The Times concluded. The sepoys seem a cheerful and kindly set, these dark-skinned patients of many races and creeds, as, clothed in the same hospital kit as is issued to the British wounded, but clinging always to their turbans or their long hair, they sit in the sunny gardens, or wait their turn for a “joy-ride” and a visit to a cinematograph, or get their strength back in light fatigue duty.

This imperial self-congratulation masked a much more sinister purpose of the Indian hospitals: the reintroduction of racial segregation. The Kitchener Hospital maintained a police guard of 45 men “to prevent escapes of followers over the walls” and

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530 “The King at the Front,” The Times, December 2, 1914.
“the passage of drink etc. into the hospital.”

While acknowledging that Indian soldiers required space to get fresh air “in order to hasten their convalescence,” Lawrence maintained from early on that “in places like Brighton and Bournemouth it will be fatal to let them about in the streets.” At the York Place Hospital, where there were no exercise grounds, guards led small parties of Indians through the town. At the Kitchener Indian Hospital, Bruce Seton assured authorities, “Military discipline very soon converted a mob of bazar coolies into an efficient body of men.” Still, incidents requiring discipline occurred throughout the hospital’s time in operation. “It was evident, from the very first, that drink and the sex problem were factors which would have to be reckoned with,” he noted. “A large portion of the followers, the sweepings of Bombay city, were found to be habitual drunkards; and the ill-advised conduct of the women of the town, though partly innocent, was bound to result in the gravest scandals.” To deal with these problems, the Kitchener Hospital worked out a system of “absolutely inflexible rules” governing the granting of permission to leave the hospital grounds. Hospital authorities experimented with a number of systems of “increasing degree of restriction” through December and January, before finally settling on a system in February 1915. From then on, all Indian personnel were kept at all times in the Hospital area. The only exceptions made were for convalescent Indian officers and Indian warrant officers on the staff, who were allowed out without a pass up to dusk and, with a pass, up to named hours. Selected individuals of the personnel in parties of three were occasionally allowed for a walk in the charge of a

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532 TNA WO 95/5110, letter from camp commandant Kitchener Hospital to India Office, June 24, 1915.
533 TNA WO 32/5110, Lawrence to Kitchener, December 15, 1915.
private of the R.A.M.C. and parties of convalescent patients were sent out daily for route
marches accompanied by members of the hospital personnel.\textsuperscript{534}

Despite the strict regulations, Seton admitted that the confinement of a staff of
600 Indians in the hospital area was no easy matter. The hospital walls were
supplemented by barbed wire, but when this proved insufficient, Seton ordered the
creation of a Military Police Guard to prevent cases of “breaking out.” From then on,
most of the offenses dealt with by the hospital authorities “were of the type that was to be
expected” such as smoking in the wooden huts, losing clothing, gambling, quarrelling,
lights burning at unauthorized hours, and disobeying orders. Only one serious case
occurred, Seton reported, when a sub-assistant surgeon attempted to shoot the
Commanding Officer “as a ‘protest’ against the confinement of the personnel in the
Hospital area.” The incident resulted in a trial by Summary General Court Martial and a
sentence of seven years imprisonment.\textsuperscript{535}

The conduct of hospital personnel notwithstanding, Seton maintained that the
behavior of the convalescent soldiers was “extremely good.” Of the nearly 4000 cases to
pass through the hospital, only 24 were brought before Seton for various crimes, “mostly
minor ones arising out of the novelty of the conditions in which these men found
themselves.” Seton stated,

\begin{quote}
It must be remembered that the patients were dressed exactly like British sick, that they
had the same bedding and hospital equipment, and that the whole internal administration
of the Hospital was carried on exactly the lines of a British station hospital. So utterly
different is this from the ‘Ma-Bap’ governance of the Indian regimental system, that it is
very remarkable that so few cases of breaking rules occurred.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{534} IOR L/MIL/7/17316, Seton, \textit{A Report on Kitchener Indian Hospital}, 6-8.
\textsuperscript{535} Ibid.
Three cases did find their way to Court Martial. One involved the theft of an officer’s revolver, which occurred in France and was only discovered in the Hospital. The soldier was sentenced to two years of rigorous imprisonment. The other two cases were for malingering and the men were acquitted. Seton noted, “It may be pointed out here that to convict in cases of this sort, however strong the evidence, is in practice, almost impossible.”

Although very few sepoys ever received punishment for openly disobeying rules governing their segregation from Europeans, a number did complain openly about hospital policy. During a visit to the Bournemouth hospital in December 1914, Walter Lawrence encountered two Indian officers who complained, “as indeed did the men in the wards, that the hospital resembled a prison.” Walter explained, “A hospital was a prison, and until they were convalescent they would not be allowed out of the Hospital and the garden surrounding it.” But sepoys continued to find ways of resisting policy aimed at segregating them from Europeans. At the York Place Hospital in February 1915, Lawrence reported, “we recently had a case where some men in charge of a Havildar who was supposed to be trustworthy, got into a public house: steps have been taken to prevent the recurrence of such a thing.” While newspapers represented wounded sepoys in the thrall of the social order imposed by British authorities, incidents such as these suggest that many did not actually accept the values and ideologies of imperial rule.

Consider the biggest concern of hospital administrators and policy makers: “the sex problem.” Empires and wartime exigencies may have necessitated the deployment

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536 Ibid.
537 TNA WO 32/5110, Lawrence to Kitchener, December 15, 1914.
538 TNA WO 32/5110, Lawrence to Kitchener, February 15, 1915.
of some 138,000 Indian soldiers to Europe in order to save the Empire, but British authorities just as readily acknowledged that by doing so they ran the risk of undermining the entire imperial edifice. In India, as was the case throughout the British Empire before the war, white women were foundational to the construction of whiteness and the policing of racial borders.\footnote{Barbara Bush, “Gender and Empire: The Twentieth Century,” in Levine, ed., Gender and Empire, 90.} Imperial states tended to matters of intimacy – both sexual and affective - because it was precisely within this realm that the imperial project, with all policies designed to protect white privilege, was at its most vulnerable.\footnote{Ann Laura Stoler, “Matters of Intimacy as Matters of State: A Response,” Journal of American History 88.3 (Dec., 2001), 893-897.} Racism, Philippa Levine has argued, “was functionally necessary to the stability of imperial rule.”

The deployment of Indian soldiers to Europe “brought about an increasingly alarmist link between racial mistrust and a vision of sexual disorder in which ‘unruly’ women and potentially disloyal colonials were subject to far more rigorous controls than other groups.”\footnote{Philippa Levine, “Battle Colors: Race, Sex, and Colonial Soldiery in World War I,” Journal of Women’s History 9.4 (Winter, 1998), 106.}

From the point of view of British policymakers, Indian soldiers fighting in Europe could not enjoy the kinds of privileges and liberties that white soldiers from the Dominions enjoyed. Maintaining racial hierarchies meant denying Indian soldiers access to white women.\footnote{See Levine, “Battle Colors.” See also: Jeffrey Greenhut, “The Imperial Reserve: The Indian Corps on the Western Front, 1914-15,” Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History 12.1 (1983): 54-73; Visram, Asians in Britain.} Secretary Crewe expressed his concern with the choice of Brighton as a site for Indian Hospitals in a December 1914 letter to Lord Hardinge: “Brighton seems to me a bad place, since even if ‘Arry has to some extent enlisted, ‘Arriet is all the more
at a loose end and ready to take on the Indian warrior.” Sir Walter Lawrence considered the Indian hospital at Marseilles to be situated “sufficiently far from Marseilles to prevent the dangers which arise from the women and, as far as I can ascertain from old French friends in this city, the Indians have on the whole behaved very well.” The Viceroy remained concerned, however, and wrote in a telegram: “Officer in charge Lord Kitchener Indian Hospital Brighton in private letter has indicated the necessity for special measures to prevent too frequent intercourse with Indian attendants and patients.” He added, “We regard lessening of evil as most important.” Lawrence assured the India Office that, having spoken with Bruce Seton at the Kitchener Hospital and the Chief Constable of Brighton, “the arrangements made are ample & Bruce Seton is confident that there will be no incidents. The Indians are behaving like gentlemen.”

From various sources, however, it is clear that intimate encounters between Indian soldiers and white women occurred with a degree of frequency. One Sikh recovering in hospital at Milford wrote his father in January 1915, “The English ladies (‘meman’) love me.” The Censor of Indian Mail, E.B. Howell, noted in April 1915, It would appear from the tenor of certain letters passing between the Base Camp at Marseilles, where the scum of the Army has naturally tended to collect, and the front, that

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545 IOR L/MIL/7/18920, telegram from Viceroy, March 17, 1915.
546 IOR L/MIL/7/18920, letter from Walter Lawrence, March 19, 1915.
548 IOR L/MIL/17347, letter from a wounded Sikh, January 22, 1915.
the Indian soldiers in camp at Marseilles have been able in some cases to obtain access to the women of the neighborhood and that a certain amount of illicit intercourse with them is going on.

He added, “This cannot but be very prejudicial to good discipline.” Indeed, French women occupy the minds of the sepoys in Across the Black Waters from the very moment they step off the boat in Marseilles. Anand’s protagonist, Lalu, “Could not keep his eyes off the smiling, pretty-frocked girls with breasts half showing, bright and gleaming with a happiness that he wanted to think was all for him.”

The matter of white nurses working in the hospitals was a particularly loaded matter. In late October 1914, Sir James Willcocks protested against the employment of women in any capacity in the Indian Hospitals in a letter to the War Office. In the case of the Lady Hardinge Hospital, administration of which fell beyond the jurisdiction of the War Office, he offered that women might be employed in a supervisory capacity. Lord Crewe concurred with the sentiments and on November 4, the War Office ordered that women would not be posted to military hospitals for Indian troops. Hospitals did not adhere uniformly to the November 4 order, however. The Kitchener Hospital never had any female nurses, its commander reported, adding: “Women as nurses are out of place in an Indian unit.” Yet women nurses did continue to work at the Pavilion, York Place, and Lady Hardinge Hospitals without further comment from authorities. The matter only erupted into considerable controversy when the Daily Mail published a photograph on May 24, 1915 showing an English nurse standing beside a wounded sepoy at the Lady Hardinge Hospital in Brockenhurst. Sir Alfred Keogh in the War Office promptly

549 IOR L/MIL/17347, Censors’ Report, April 24, 1915.
551 IOR L/MIL/7/17316.
“condemned absolutely and totally the employment of nurses with Indian troops” and ordered the withdrawal of all nurses from the Indian hospitals, adding, “Anyone who knew anything about Indian customs would have prevented this scandal by forbidding the services of women nurses with Indian troops.”

Sir Havelock Charles, the Commanding Officer at the Lady Hardinge, and J.P. Hewett, Chairman of the Indian Soldiers’ Fund, protested the War Office’s directive, insisting that nurses there performed “no menial duties; [they] merely look to the cleanliness of the wards, see to the distribution of linen, give all medicines and supervise the food and help in the training of orderlies.” Upon further investigation, Hewett was able to determine that the offending photograph had not even been taken at the Lady Hardinge Hospital. The soldier, Khodadad Khan, had received the Victoria Cross and the Lady Hardinge Hospital had never had a Victoria Cross winner in it. Furthermore, by comparing the uniform of the nurse in the picture with that worn by the nurses at the Lady Hardinge, it was clear that they were not the same. “So in this case we are totally innocent,” Hewett concluded. “If this has occurred at Brighton then it is very hard that the Lady Hardinge Hospital should be made to suffer by it.” He closed:

We started this Hospital to do our best for the Indian wounded committed to our charge – to do our very best – so that our fellow subjects returning to India should carry with them the kindliest memories of England. … If you desire to keep our standard of efficiency you may close the Hospital if you give up the nurses.

In June, nurses were removed from all Indian hospitals in England with the exception of the Lady Hardinge Hospital “for the protection of women and empire.” The protests of

554 Visram, Asians in Britain, 186-187.
Sir Charles and J.P. Hewett seem to have convinced the new Secretary of State for India, Austin Chamberlain, whose subordinate wrote to the War Office:

> It is not apparent from the correspondence what are the reasons that have led to the proposal to withdraw lady nurses from the Hospitals for Indian troops.

> So far as the Lady Hardinge Hospital in concerned Mr. Secretary Chamberlain sees no reason to doubt the accuracy of the statements made in Sir John Hewett’s letter of 17th June as to the valuable service rendered by the staff of nurses employed there and as to the difficulty of replacing them if they are withdrawn...

> I am to recommend that unless the nurses at the Lady Hardinge Hospital are urgently required for duty elsewhere, the existing arrangements, in the absence of evidence that they are open to any administrative or disciplinary objection or are disliked by the patients, should be left undisturbed.\

The nursing “scandal” revealed that racism was built into the British Empire, but Lawrence understood that racism did not make for good propaganda. He received two letters from Sir Shapurji Broacha “urging that Sepoys were entitled to the ministration of Nurses.” Lawrence wrote to Kitchener in August 1915:

> In this matter I think that the opinion of the I.M.S. Officer Commanding Hospitals should prevail, but one has to consider Native opinion and political issues. One Indian of the I.M.S. said, “You take our men and money and yet deny us good nursing.” This of course is not true, as in all the Hospitals the men get admirable nursing…. I have explained to Sir Shapurji Broacha that the removal of the Nurses from Brighton was due to the fact that their services were more urgently required elsewhere.

This section has demonstrated that Indian hospitals tried to reinforce the ideologies of imperial rule. British audiences who read about the hospitals in newspapers and

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555 IOR L/MIL/7/17316.
556 Also see the discussion in Visram, *Asians in Britain*, 185-192.
557 TNA WO 32/5110, Lawrence to Kitchener, August 5, 1915.
magazines consumed sanitized versions of the actual trauma experienced by Indian soldiers. By donating their time or money to the Indian hospitals, they aided British wartime policy geared towards returning sepoys to the front. But Indian hospitals also worked to reinforce the Empire’s racial hierarchies. The British hoped that segregated hospitals would protect the Empire’s gender and racial hierarchies. To some extent they succeeded. But sepoys did not quietly accept the social order British authorities imposed. They resisted in subtle ways and, in so doing, challenged their own racial subjugation.

**Indian Hospitals and the British Empire in India**

Indian hospitals could also serve the interests of the British Empire beyond the shores of England and the trenches of the Western Front. Hospital authorities hoped their efforts to repair damaged bodies at hospitals in Europe could sustain Indian support for the war. To this end, Walter Lawrence tried to control what was said about the hospitals to audiences in India. He succeeded in limiting the kind of information available to Indian audiences to some extent and, by all accounts, succeeded in presenting the Indian hospitals in the best possible light. Yet Lawrence and hospital administrators had only limited control over the actual content of Indian soldier letters. While many sepoys said very affirming things about the time they spent recovering in hospitals in England and France, the endless hours they had to write letters were often spent recounting the horrors of the Western Front. These stories, in turn, made the job of British recruiters in India much more difficult.
In India, naturally, the friends and relatives of soldiers shipped off to fight in France anxiously awaited news of the war. As the first shipments of permanently disabled soldiers began arriving in the Subcontinent in 1915, newspapers in the Punjab wondered aloud what policies, if any, the government might put in place to care for those who made such sacrifices for the Empire. In Lahore, the *Desh* asserted in November 1915, one of the most important questions with which the British nation will be confronted at the end of the war is the question of the maintenance and protection of those soldiers who, while performing their duty in the war, have been so severely disabled as to be incapable of earning a livelihood for themselves or their relatives. The British Government has prepared a scheme to solve the difficulty, and this scheme is to be put before a committee for consideration. But will the Government adopt similar measures for maintaining Indian soldiers totally disabled in the present war, and for supporting their relatives? We confidently hope that Government will adopt such measures.\(^558\)

For those newspapers committed to supporting the British Empire and its recruiting efforts in India, it was also important that something be done to control what wounded soldiers said about their experiences in Europe. The *Siraj-ul-Akbar (Jhelum)* conceded on March 15, 1915, that “illiterate villagers are, to some extent, the originators of absurd was rumours.” However, the newspaper continued, In these days the wounded, who come to the hospitals of our country, narrate before the common people or their relatives strange stories of what they have witnessed with their own eyes, which conflict with the contents of official newspapers. They should be prohibited from telling anything about the war, as such rumours especially raise obstacles in the way of recruiting new men for the army.\(^559\)


Clearly, the British Empire had to do something if they wanted to ensure that the work they did in hospitals in France and England paid dividends in India.

To this end, Walter Lawrence tried to control and block the spread of any potentially damaging news to Indians who were outside the barbed wire confines of the hospitals. With the lessons of 1857 never far in the background, the Commissioner was alarmed to discover in late 1914 “that in the absence of ghee, margarine was being supplied” to the wounded soldiers. Lawrence acted quickly to ensure that regular supplies of ghee came to England and France from India. He also asked the India Office “whether any of the margarine manufacturers would guarantee a margarine free of beef and pigs’ fat.” Sir Alfred Keogh at the War Office, meanwhile, promptly issued orders that no margarine was to be served out. “This is a matter that must be very closely watched,” Keogh wrote. “If it got about that we were using margarine, there might be an explosion similar to the old cartridge trouble of the Mutiny.”

The work of missionaries at the hospitals proved to be a particularly sticky issue. Another lesson the British took from 1857 was that the work of missionaries had directly contributed to popular unrest. Lawrence therefore ordered authorities at the hospitals in France, where the Y.M.C.A. was in close contact with the Indians, “to keep a very sharp eye on the proceedings” of the organization “and to prevent Sepoys using Y.M.C.A. paper with the inscription ‘Christian Anjuman’ for their letters home. Many such letters have gone, and great capital will be made in India by agitators who are doing their utmost

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560 TNA WO 32/5110, letter from Alfred Keogh.
to cause disaffection in our Army.”562 In February 1915 at the Pavilion, Lawrence
discovered that a wounded Indian soldier had a vernacular translation of the Gospel of St.
Mark. “I asked him where he had got it, and he said a lady had given it to him.
Everybody who visits the Hospitals is supposed to write their name in a book, and they
will be shown a notice begging them not to take any books of a religious nature.”
Lawrence stressed: “We cannot be too careful, as if it got abroad that any attempt has
been made to proselytize men who are sick or wounded, there would be great trouble.”563

Hospital authorities also tried to control the condition in which the Indian soldiers
left the hospitals. For those soldiers returning to India, Lawrence noted: “I think it is of
the highest political importance that they should return to India as regiments, armed and
equipped, and that the spectacle of wounded and sick men in Hospital clothes will have a
very depressing effect in India, and a very bad effect on recruiting.”564 In India, Lord
Hardinge arranged for wounded men to receive 50 Rupees upon landing at Bombay and
suggested that this fact be reported to wounded Indians in Akbar-i-Jang, a vernacular
newspaper supplied by the War Office to wounded Indians.565 Meanwhile, the Home
Office made special arrangements for the remains of Indian soldiers who died at hospital
in England. “It is most undesirable to put any difficulty in the way of giving Hindu
soldiers the last rites of their religion,” read an internal memo.566 A burning Ghat at
Patcham, five miles outside Brighton, ought to have been prohibited by the Cremation

562 TNA WO 32/5110, Lawrence to Kitchener, March 10, 1915. See also Visram, Asians
in Britain, 183-184.
563 TNA WO 32/5110, Lawrence to Kitchener, February 15, 1915.
564 TNA WO 32/5110, 15 June 1915.
565 TNA WO 32/5110, Precis of Report by Sir Walter Lawrence on the Indian Hospitals,
July 21, 1915.
566 TNA HO 45/10761/270222, “Cremation of the remains of Indian soldiers” at the
Royal Victoria Hospital, Netley, November 2, 1914.
Act of 1902. The Secretary of State regarded the matter “as being outside the restrictions” imposed by the law, however, and only required that a register should be kept showing “that his body was cremated in accordance with the rite of his religion.”

By late 1915, every soldier who left the Pavilion for the front, or for India, carried with him a copy of a booklet published in English, Gurmukhi and Urdu describing the use of the Royal Pavilion at Brighton as a hospital for Indian soldiers. The Government of India also purchased 20,000 copies of the booklet for distribution in India.

“Everything has been done to make the wounded Indians as comfortable and happy as possible,” the booklet declared. “Not only do they live in a Royal Palace, but the splendid grounds which surround it have been reserved for them, which goes far to promote their quick return to health and strength.”

The booklet made a special point to emphasize the hospital’s exemplary medical facilities and amenities, the various ways in which caste and religious differences were meticulously respected, and the aforementioned visit by the King, “who had come specially to decorate with his own hands” eleven Indian soldiers. After the ceremony, the King and Queen proceeded to the wards to see the Indians who were not well enough to attend. “There again, as on the previous visit, the King and Queen by their gracious sympathy gave many wounded soldiers a proud and happy memory that will be handed down to generations. In many an Indian village in the years to come these soldiers, their fighting days long over, will talk to their children’s

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567 TNA HO 45/10761/270222, letter to the Officer in Charge, Royal Victoria Hospital, Netley from the Home Office, November 6, 1914. See also Visram, Asians in Britain, 182.
569 Corporation of Brighton, A Short History in English, Gurmukhi and Urdu of the Royal Pavilion Brighton and a Description of it as a Hospital for Indian Soldiers (Brighton: King, Thorne and Stace, 1915), 9.
children of the Great War. Their faces will then glow with pride as they tell of that day when they were lying wounded in a Royal Palace and the King and Queen came to their bedsides and spoke to them words of tender sympathy and cheer.”

British officials contented themselves that their efforts to limit and control the kind of information available to audiences in India had the desired effect. Lord Hardinge, Viceroy of India, wrote that the work done in the Indian hospitals “tends to increase our prestige in this country and also the attachment the lower classes have to the Sircar [King George V].” Lawrence wrote: “Perhaps the best judges of the experiment were the Indian soldiers themselves.” In his final report on the arrangements made for sick and wounded Indian soldiers in France and England, Lawrence stated that he could “quote from letters without end.” He offered only two. Naik Sant Singh wrote from Brighton: “I have been in hospital for one month and 22 days in bed, and the Government treated me so kindly that not even my own father and mother could have done more.” Jemadar Chulam Muhiyudin wrote: “One gets such service as no one can get in his own house, not even a noble. One gets meat, milk, tea, and all sorts of fruit, applies, pears, and oranges, sweet-meats as much as one can eat, milk as much as one can drink, and most excellent beds beyond description. These are no fables. This country compared with others is like Heaven.” Lawrence, for his part, concluded:

I think that the work has been of some use. It has shown to the sick and wounded Indians in very strange circumstances that there was a personal interest in them, and in my conversations with the sorely stricken I have not hesitated, as I was authorized, to convey [Lord Kitchener’s] sympathy. In some ways they are children, but intensely proud,

570 Ibid, 15.
571 Visram, Asians in Britain, 183.
573 Ibid.
shrewd and sensitive…. Of one thing I am sure, that it was a wise policy considering the political condition of India to bring Indian troops to Europe. They have left France with a profound respect for the British soldier and for British resources. They go back deeply impressed with the mechanical side of warfare…. And the lesson taught by the bold and wise policy of giving India a chance may be of enormous value to those who will soon be called upon to organize the real and actual British Empire.\(^{574}\)

The Censor of Indian letters appreciated, however, that the matter of what the Indians said in letters written from their hospital beds was not such a cut-and-dry matter. In his “Report on Twelve Months’ Working of the Indian Mail Censorship,” E.B. Howell noted that the letters written by Indians from hospital “where the men had leisure to write and unlimited notepaper” represented a special case: “The men in hospital…either do not know or do not realize that their letters are read because they do not see it done. They therefore write more freely.”\(^{575}\)

By March 1915, letters from Indian wounded in England to India and the Far East and the other Indian Expeditionary Forces numbered anywhere from 1500 to 4000 a week. Howell, therefore, only ever read a small sampling of what the Indian soldiers had to say yet he maintained that the tenor was favorable to the British Empire. To be sure, the Censor had reported earlier in January, “Some very doleful reductions have been stopped and sent back to the officer in charge of the hospital from which they were written.” But he added: “The general tone is however wonderfully good. The English country and the people, the excellence of the arrangements made for the comfort of the Indian wounded and the kindness of the King and Queen on the occasion of their visit to

\(^{574}\) Ibid.

\(^{575}\) IOR L/MIL/17347, note by the Censor, January 23, 1915.
Brighton are all mentioned over and over again in terms of the warmest admiration." A Hindu of the Peshawar district wrote to a friend at home: "Do not worry about me, for I am in Paradise. The King came down here last week and shook hands with all the Indians, and asked each one about his wounds, and sufferings, and gave consolation to each." A Subedar-major of the 6th Jats in hospital at Brighton echoed similar sentiments in a letter to a friend in India: "We are in England. It is a very fine country. The inhabitants are very amiable and are very kind to us, so much so that our own people could not be as much so. The food, the clothes, and the buildings are very fine. Everything is such as one would not see even in a dream. One should regard it as a fairyland." Even Indian hospital staffers appear to have been impressed with the lengths to which the British went to accommodate the wounded. A Parsi doctor at Brighton wrote to a friend in Bombay on January 23, "Everyone wants to speak to us. The people are so friendly that it is impossible to write of it. In the shops and the trams we are treated with great kindness. Brighton is well worth seeing." One Sub-Assistant Surgeon serving in a hospital in England wrote to a relative in India, "I had been to see another hospital here this afternoon. There were about 1,000 patients, all quite happy, and seeing the arrangements there, I think every one of them must be thanking God for having a bullet in their body. I really envied them. There were phonographs and pianos playing everywhere, fruits supplied in large amounts, clothes, &c., handcarts for patients, and

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576 IOR L/MIL/17347, extracts from Reports made the Censor for Indian Mails in France, January 16, 1915.
577 IOR L/MIL/17347, from wounded sepoy to friend in Peshawar, January 22, 1915.
578 IOR L/MIL/17347, from a wounded Subedar-Major to a friend in India.
579 IOR L/MIL/17347, from a Parsi doctor to a friend in Bombay, January 23, 1915.
every possible comfort. The patients have become fat and plump." A Mahratta medical subordinate in England wrote to a friend in India: “The people are so very good and kind that they make no difference between black and white. Every one seeks every opportunity of becoming fast friends with us and of serving us in any way in their power.”

For some soldiers, their experiences in hospital were cause enough to reaffirm imperial loyalty to friends and family members back home. A Sikh wrote to his brother in Amritsar, “If any of us is wounded, or is otherwise ill, Government or some one else always treats him very kindly. Our Government takes great care of us, and we too will be loyal and fight. You must give the Government all the help it requires. Now look you my brother our father the King-Emperor of India needs us, and any of us who refuses to help him in his need should be counted among the most polluted sinners. It is our first duty to show our loyal gratitude to Government.”

A Sikh wrote to a friend in India from a hospital in England: “The wounded Indian soldiers are being treated in England with such great care that my pen fails to describe it. We ought to give our lives for our kind Government. – My brother, now is the opportunity for us to show our loyalty, and we shall surely take it. A better our kind Government will never give us.”

Letters received by wounded Indians in hospital often reinforced such sentiments of imperial fidelity. One letter from a relative in India to a Sikh in hospital in England read: “I congratulate you on having given full proof of your loyalty and fidelity to the King, and shown no regard for

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580 IOR L/MIL/17347, from a Sub-Assistant surgeon to a relative in India.
581 IOR L/MIL/17347, from a Mahratta medical subordinate to a friend in India, January 27, 1915.
582 IOR L/MIL/17347, from a wounded Sikh to his brother, January 15, 1915.
583 IOR L/MIL/17347, from a wounded Sikh, February 9, 1915.
your life. If you get a high place from the Government and much honour and exaltation, your life will be a source of pride to your family and kinsmen.”

Such sentiments were not universal, however. In fact, by January 1915 the censor had noted a marked change in tone in the soldiers’ letters for the worse. “Grumbling is still almost entirely absent, and there is never any hint of resentment or anti-British feeling,” he assured, adding, “Quite a number of letters are still marked by the most admirable spirit, and the most appreciative references to the excellence of the arrangements in the English hospitals are still very common.” But “adverse signs” were growing more conspicuous.

Many of the men show a tendency to break into poetry which I am inclined to regard as a rather ominous sign of mental disquietude. The number of letters written by men who have obviously given way to despair has also increased both absolutely and relatively.

The increase, he stressed, was an unwelcomed sign.

What is more significant still is the proportion of letters which, though they show no sign of giving way to despair or of any faltering in devotion to duty, yet give a melancholy impression of fatalistic resignation to a fate that is regarded as speedy and inevitable. This feeling too appears to be spreading.

At the censor’s office, Howell determined that the cause of such widespread despondency was British policy geared towards returning wounded sepoys to the front. Already by December 1914, the Censor had called attention “to the effect upon Indian feeling produced by the return to the trenches of men who had recovered from wounds.” He stated, “This is a serious matter which has engaged ever since the anxious

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584 IOR L/MIL/17347, from a relative in India to a Sikh in hospital, December 15, 1915.
585 IOR L/MIL/17347, extracts from Reports made the Censor for Indian Mails in France, January 23, 1915.
consideration of all authorities from H.M. the King downwards.” Howell added later in April that Indians thought it was unfair that their recovered comrades had to return to the front, “and the lamentations about it continue to occur over & over again in the letters of all classes.”

Numerous letters from wounded soldiers corroborate Howell’s findings. A wounded Sikh wrote on February 3 to his brother: “I have come wounded to England. The bullet is in my arm. There is much to talk of, my brother. Fortunate indeed is he who returns alive from this war. The man whose leg or arm is cut (off) does not go again into battle. But he who recovers from his wound goes back to fight.” The soldier added, “My brother, this is no war. It is the ‘Parlo’ (the final destruction of the world). A whole world is being killed. If I return alive I shall tell you much. If I end, what is there to tell.”

Another Sikh wrote to his brother in February: “Since the 10th February I have returned to the trenches. For the wounded who recover to some extent are sent back there. My heart is very sorrowful.” A Garhwali, wounded and in England, wrote to his parents in mid-February: “Here many men have been killed. In some companies only 20 or 30 are left.” The airplanes, he wrote, “are like the great bird of Vishnu” and “the cannon and the bombs fire without ceasing.” As the firing went on without rest day and night, he wondered, “How can a man be saved? There is no chance of it. Even he who has been wounded and recovers has to go again and fight.”

A wounded Sikh in hospital at Milton wrote to his brother in the Punjab: “Here I am as a king, but the war is still going

587 IOR L/MIL/17347, Censors’ Report, April 24, 1915.
588 IOR L/MIL/17347, from a wounded Sikh, February 3, 1915.
589 IOR L/MIL/17347, from a Sikh to his brother, February 10, 1915.
590 IOR L/MIL/17347, from a wounded Garhwali, February 17, 1915.
on. Hundreds and thousands of men are engaged and it goes on day after day.” He added, “There can be no confidence of life or of seeing again the dear children or of seeing you once more. For in a few days I shall go back to the war.”591 A Pathan in England wrote to his brother in the North-Western Frontier Police reporting that, his wound now quite healed, “I shall go back to the place from which I came. Pray for me always. I do not know whether I shall be alive when this letter reaches you for a great hardship is over us. I cannot tell you more. May God have pity upon us.”592

Before too long, letters written by recuperated Indians resembled those from the front that implored relatives not to enlist. A wounded Punjabi Muslim in England wrote to his mother:

Be it known to you that on the 28th of October I was wounded by a bullet in the left hand. It carried away the bone of one finger, but the rest of the hand is unharmed. … On no account allow my brothers Gulzar Khan and Sher Zaman Khan to enlist. This is my most solemn injunction.593

Yet for all the striking resemblance in tone between letters written in hospitals and those written at the front, Howell maintained that the letters written by wounded sepoys were a special case. The Indian sick and wounded, he wrote, “had leisure to write and unlimited notepaper.”594

As the demand placed on India for manpower increased, military and government officials had to intensify their recruitment strategy. In the Punjab, the entire apparatus of the state went to work procuring fresh recruits. Districts formerly excluded from military recruitment became the sites of new depots, and recruitment became a duty of all

591 IOR/L/MIL/17347, from a wounded Sikh to his brother, January 23, 1915.
592 IOR L/MIL/17347, from a Pathan to his brother, January 23, 1915.
593 IOR L/MIL/17347, from a wounded Punjabi Muslim to his mother.
594 IOR L/MIL/17347, Censor’s report.
executive and village officials “and of all who were enjoying grants of land or other marks of consideration from Government, and one of the main qualifications in establishing claims on Government.”

Starting in 1917, each village in the recruiting districts of the Punjab received notice as to the number of new recruits the government expected it to provide. Lieutenant Governor O’Dwyer wrote, “it became necessary to tap castes and tribes that had hitherto been little recruited, and to draw upon areas, especially in the South-West Punjab, which had few military traditions.”

Through the end of 1916, the Punjab provided roughly 120,000 soldiers for the British Empire, “the cream of the fighting races.” By 1917, however, in light of the expansion of the recruitment apparatus and the intensified need for manpower, “further inducements were clearly needed.” From 1917 forward, the British granted free rations to all Indian ranks, as well as an increase in pay and pensions. Recruiters promised a bonus of Rs. 50 to every combatant. “These measures did much to overcome the hesitation of the would-be-recruit and the opposition of his family,” O’Dwyer noted.

The family was more willing to part with one of its bread-winners when he was able to remit, as nearly all recruits did, the whole or the greater part of the bonus, and later a considerable party of his pay. As the War advanced, the remittances which the Indian soldiers made from their now liberal (according to the Indian standard) emoluments formed an important addition to the resources of the peasantry from which they were drawn. This was especially the case in agriculturally poor districts such as Jhelum and Rawal Pindi.

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595 O’Dwyer, *India as I Know It*, 219.
596 Ibid, 221.
597 Ibid, 222.
598 Ibid, 223.
In the face of mounting horror stories about the war, and the ever-increasing need for manpower, the British imperial state extended its reach into previously neglected districts. But business-as-usual would not have permitted the Empire to continue drawing on the manpower of India.

By holding out, impoverished peasants in the Punjab were able to use the war to better their economic situation. Punjab’s Muslim population serves as a case in point. Out of a total male population of 250,000, more than 30,000 Punjabi Muslims served in the war. Each Muslim district, in turn, received between £15,000 and £20,000 monthly in remittances. “This undoubtedly encouraged those at home to continue sending their young men to the Army, and enabled them to bear the burden of bad seasons and high prices,” O’Dwyer wrote.599

This section has demonstrated that hospital authorities tried to control what was said about Indian hospitals to audiences in India. To some extent they succeeded. Wounded Indians generally said very favorable things about the care British authorities extended. They also managed to censor potentially damaging portrayals or mistakes. Yet soldiers continued to recount the horrors of the front. At the hospitals, time and limitless resources permitted them to go on at length. Also, some soldiers who returned home spoke freely about their experiences. The stories of the wounded made it far more difficult for the British Empire to recruit as it had been. So, the recruiting officers intensified their efforts and offered greater financial incentives to new recruits and new recruiting districts after 1917.

599 Ibid, 223.
Conclusion

Indian hospitals in France and England played two critical roles during the First World War. As part of the imperial war machine, they repaired damaged bodies and wounded mentalities so that the British Empire could continue to fight battles. As part of a worldwide propaganda campaign, Indian hospitals worked to sustain support for the British Empire and imperial policy at home and abroad. British authorities recognized that they had to take into account the viewpoints of wounded Indian soldiers. Wounded soldiers found ways of malingering and many successfully avoided returning to the front. Hospitals therefore became sites where the British Empire engaged in a process of negotiation with its imperial subalterns. Hospital administrators remained unwilling, however, to budge when it came to the matter of maintaining the Empire’s racial hierarchies. To this end, they imposed strict segregationist policies at the hospitals with varying degrees of success. And while the British Empire may never have relinquished its monopoly on the power to discipline or deploy, it did need to offer some concessions in order to sustain the flow of manpower from India as the war went on. The stories of wounded soldiers undermined business-as-usual recruitment and compelled the Empire to redouble its efforts. The importance of this work for extending Britain’s lease on India is brought to light further in the next chapter, which shifts the focus to a prison camp outside Berlin where German authorities worked to win the loyalty of several hundred Indian prisoners of war.
Chapter Four
Prison

Captivity was a central part of the war experience for millions of human beings during the First World War. Estimates of the total number of soldiers taken as prisoners of war between 1914-18 vary widely. Low range estimates are just shy of seven million while high range estimates are closer to nine million.600 Soldiers surrendering to the enemy in large numbers had profound tactical implications. On August 8, 1918, the British Army attacked exhausted and badly outnumbered German troops near Amiens. Although the attack stalled two days later, the German commander, Ludendorff, called August 8 “the black day of the German army,” when nearly 30,000 German soldiers surrendered. It was the clearest signal yet received that the German army was, at long last, beaten.601 From the perspective of commanders, captured enemy soldiers served far greater utility than killed soldiers. Captured soldiers could be used as sources of intelligence, labor, hostages, and even as propaganda: if treated well, a prisoner could induce his comrades to surrender as well.602 Presented the right combination of carrot and stick, he might even be persuaded to take up arms in the cause of his captors.

This was exactly what the Germans had in mind when they captured Indian soldiers on the Western Front. The treatment sepoys received behind the lines – in this case, deep within the German Reich - had profound implications for places distant from

600 Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, 369.
602 Ibid, 371.
the actual fighting. The First World War was a clash of empires. While German soldiers fought the global armies of the combined British and French empires on the Western Front, prison camps in Germany “converted” captured Indian and African soldiers and reenlisted them in the Ottoman Army, or equipped them to strike at the colonial holdings of the British and French. Yet interned, captured sepoys were not entirely powerless. Some Indian soldiers willingly collaborated with their captors. Others resisted every appeal to their loyalty. Both sets of men revealed the extent to which imperial subalterns retained agency during the twentieth century’s opening salvo. The first part of this chapter unpacks the workings and propaganda of the prisoner of war camp at Zossen, the epicenter of the Reich’s campaign to “convert” captured sepoys. Propaganda at this prison camp (among others) combined elements of pan-Islamic jihad and Ghadar’s brand of revolutionary nationalism. At the same time, representations of captured Indian soldiers intended for German audiences just as readily reproduced the racial stereotypes underpinning imperial rule. Second, this chapter unpacks the host of strategies used by captured sepoys to put their own captivity and the British-German rivalry to some modicum of advantage for themselves. Everyday forms of self-help and resistance reveal that sepoys cared a lot more about surviving the war and returning home than fighting another war on another front. Finally, this chapter looks at German attempts to export revolution to the gates of India. A number of sepoys joined expeditions that made it as far as Kabul, Afghanistan, where the Germans hoped to cajole the Emir to sever his ties to the British Empire and invade India. These missions failed, in no small part, because the British kept careful tabs on German activities at Zossen. Using previously underexploited resources, like the testimonies and letters of Indian prisoners of war in Germany, this
study is the first to consider how the captor-captive relationship shaped what sepoys were willing to say about the war and the British Empire.

**Imperial Captivity**

For much of the war, Indian prisoners of war interned in camps scattered throughout the Reich received special treatment and accommodation because of their status as imperial subalterns. The German Empire and its Ghadar allies were eager to recruit sepoys to the ranks of their pan-Islamic jihad and revolutionary cadre. Good treatment and propaganda, they believed, could “convert” Indian soldiers to the cause of toppling the British Empire in India. At the same time, the presence of Indian and other colonial soldiers in the heart of Germany contributed to a significant “racializing” process - one that both infantilized and demonized Indian soldiers. Thus, while propaganda inside the prison camps aimed at destabilizing the structures of the British Empire, propaganda outside the barbed-wire confines of the camps embedded the ideologies and racial hierarchies of imperial rule.

The First World War marked a crucial watershed in the way European states and their militaries treated captured civilians and soldiers. At the turn of the century, Spanish General Valeriano Weyler invented internment camps during the brutal war he waged in Cuba from 1896-97. During the South Africa War, the British used crude concentration camps to segregate and supervise the Boers. The First World War marked the first time European powers deployed these colonial practices in Europe.603 The majority of soldiers who fought in the war had been civilians prior to August 1914 and in the age of mass

armies any civilian could just as readily become a soldier. Soldiers and civilians alike, therefore, were the representatives of nations at war. As such, the military powers fighting in Europe deposited both in a vast and complex labyrinth of concentration camps, prisoner of war camps, and forced labor battalions. All of the major powers, Germany included, made some nominal effort to honor their prewar commitment to the liberal tradition and the stipulations of the 1899 and 1907 Hague Conventions. But any lingering “benevolent captivity interpretation” fails to take into account the widespread brutalities and systematic violence forced upon combatant prisoners of war.

The First World War also marked a watershed in the sheer volume of human beings interned: between seven and nine million. None of the combatant states were prepared in August 1914 for flood of prisoners of war. In February 1915, United States Senator Albert Beveridge, a onetime Roosevelt Progressive from Indiana and something of a Germanophile, toured a number of prison camps in Germany. By the end of December 1914, he counted, Germany held 586,000 prisoners of war: 310,000 Russians, 220,000 French, 40,000 Belgian, and 16,000 British. Just a little more than a month later, he estimated, Germany held 700,000 captured enemy soldiers. The total amounted to about one percent of Germany’s total prewar population.

A number of Indian soldiers fell captive to the German Reich during the back-and-forth battles outside Ypres in the closing months of 1914. Five soldiers belonging to

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the 2/2nd Gurkhas surrendered on November 2 when German soldiers, aided by well-placed machineguns and mortars, attacked their hodge-podge network of trenches north of Neuve Chapelle, killing around 200 men by their estimate. Havildar Ganga Ram later told his captors that he and his men had only been at the front eight days when a hail of German hand grenades forced them to surrender. At Festubert later that month, German soldiers captured a small number of soldiers belonging to the 58th Rifles and the 9th Bhopals. The fighting leading up to the unplanned Christmas truce produced an especially large haul of Indian prisoners. German infantry captured about 100 sepoys belonging to the 129th Baluchis, 59th Rifles, and 125th Napier Rifles between December 18 and 20. On December 20, 142 Gurkhas belonging to various regiments and a number of soldiers from the 9th Bhopals fell captive to the Germans.

These sepoys, like so many of the soldiers captured in the early months of the conflict, spent most of the First World War navigating Germany’s enormous network of prison camps. Taken prisoner in the fighting at Festubert on December 19, Subadar-Major Sher Singh Rana of the 1/4th Gurkha Rifles first went to La Bassée and then Lille. There, he later testified, “the Indian soldiers were left behind, but the Gurkhas (who were treated as Europeans) were sent with the Turkish and French prisoners to Cologne.” After a stint at Cologne, the Germans sent him by rail to a prison camp at Osnabruck where he remained until April 1916. He was then interned briefly at the prison camp at Zossen,

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607 PAAA R19354, report on Zossen, August 16, 1915. Merewether and Smith place official casualties for the 2/2 Gurkhas on November 2 at 7 British officers killed, 1 wounded; 4 Gurkha officers killed and 3 wounded. Other ranks, 31 killed and 101 wounded or missing. See The Indian Corps in France, 83.
608 PAAA R19354, report on Zossen, August 16, 1915.
609 PAAA R21244, letter from Walter to Oppenheim, December 7, 1914.
610 PAAA R19354, report on Zossen, August 16, 1915.
outside Berlin. In August 1916, camp authorities transferred Rana to Clausthal where he stayed for seven or eight months. From there he went to a punishment camp at Strohen and later, a hospital in Holland. The Germans at long last repatriated Subadar-Major Rana to England in 1918.\footnote{TNA FO 383/390, sworn statement of Subadar-Major Sher Singh Rana 1/4\textsuperscript{th} Gurkha Rifles. In the original transcript, the word ‘Turkish’ is circled. The soldiers to whom Rana refers were likely North Africans.}

The decentralized nature of Germany’s network of prison camps, coupled with poor record keeping, makes it impossible to pin down the exact number of Indian soldiers taken captive during the war. Quite possibly, the Germans themselves never really knew the actual number.\footnote{See: Wilhelm Doegen, \textit{Kriegsgefangene Völker}, Vol. I (Berlin: 1921). Doegen, for example, made no distinction between British and Indian soldiers in his tables showing the total number of prisoners captured by the Germans, lumping both together under the category “Engländer.”} In August 1915, Field Marshal French complained that the Germans never furnished him with an accurate list of Indian prisoners. The lists he did receive were “so incomplete in details that hitherto it has been impossible to identify more than sixty per cent of the individuals mentioned.”\footnote{IOR L/MIL/7/13561, dispatch from Field Marshal Sir French to the War Office, August 31, 1915.} One list, for example, identified an Indian prisoner only as “Thapa.” A beleaguered secretary at the Prisoners of War Department in London circled the name and scribbled in the margins, “In one Gurkha regt alone there are over 100 “Thapas” missing.”\footnote{IOR L/MIL/7/13561, list of Indian prisoners of war, received December 15, 1915.} By November 1915, the Indian Soldiers’ Fund had the names of nearly 500 Indian prisoners in Germany to whom it sent care parcels.\footnote{Merewether and Smith, \textit{Indian Corps}, 503.} At that time, however, 3247 Indian soldiers were still categorized on its rolls as “missing.”\footnote{Ibid, 459.} A century has elapsed and the frustrations of the war’s contemporaries have not been
settled. Historian Gerhard Höpp counted anywhere between 500 and 600 Indian prisoners of war in Germany. The estimates of other historians are higher, in the range of 1000.

From the first months of the war, German authorities considered Muslim prisoners of war to be of a special case: they represented potential recruits for the pan-Islamic jihad. The French, Oppenheim maintained, deployed North Africans as cannon fodder at the front and treated them as slaves in the colonies. “All of these Turkos are undoubtedly just as bitter enemies of the French as their countrymen back home,” he wrote. Many of those in captivity “also seriously doubt the prospects of a final victory, and this could spoil their interest in remaining loyal to France.” If the Germans managed to “convert” a number of North Africans, the Reich could redeploy the soldiers to various fronts under Turkish and German leadership. The “converted” would then persuade fellow countrymen in the French trenches opposite them to desert to the side of the Central Powers. “The arrival of the first detachment of prisoners in Constantinople will naturally make a great impression,” Oppenheim added. The example set by these soldiers would inspire the masses of the Ottoman Empire, setting in motion an unstoppable Turkish army that, Oppenheim maintained, would conquer Egypt, sweep across Tripoli, and wrest Northwest Africa from the hands of the French.

In similar fashion, Oppenheim earmarked captured Indian sepoys for Ghadar’s anti-imperial revolution. When he first learned that the British intended to deploy Indian

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617 Gerhard Höpp, Muslime in der Mark: Als Kriegsgefangene und Internierte in Wünsdorf und Zossen, 1914-1924 (Berlin: Das Arab Buch, 1997), 46.
618 Ravi Ahuja, “The Corrosiveness of Comparison,” 146.
619 PAAA R21244, Foreign Office memo by Baron von Oppenheim, October 1914.
620 PAAA R21244, Ibid.
troops to the Western Front, Oppenheim wrote, “Hopefully a great number will fall into our captivity.” Indian prisoners who then renounced their allegiance to Britain could join an expedition to Afghanistan where they would convince the Emir to launch an invasion of India. In the ensuing disorder and general panic, the soldiers would then work alongside other Indian nationalists to propagate a general uprising against England in India. Other Indian prisoners could serve at the Western Front where they would encourage newly captured Indian soldiers to join the revolution. “These proposals would be very low cost,” Oppenheim boasted as an added benefit.

Because of their special status, North African and Indian prisoners of war merited special treatment. In October 1914, Oppenheim outlined a general policy to intern all of France’s African and Muslim soldiers at a single camp outside Berlin. He stipulated that the soldiers should be well treated, provided with a mosque, and allowed to observe any and all religious rituals. If the soldiers wanted meat, German authorities should provide it and should allow the prisoners to prepare it according to the rites of their religion. Imams and Mullahs from Constantinople and Damascus - particularly those of a more “fanatical” or anti-French persuasion - could work in the camp and compel the interned soldiers to renounce their loyalty to the French Government. Oppenheim believed that France’s Muslim subjects, won over by these gestures, would turn on the French. As for Indian prisoners of war, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, Oppenheim stipulated, “They

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621 PAAA R21244, Ibid.
622 PAAA R21244, Telegram from Oppenheim, November 1914.
623 PAAA R21244, Ibid.
624 PAAA R21244, Foreign Office memo by Baron von Oppenheim, October 1914.
must be treated with consideration similar to the French Muslims, in accordance with their various religions and customs."\textsuperscript{625}

In November 1914, the Intelligence Office for the East drafted a proposal outlining proper “care and handling of Indian prisoners.” The Indian troops fighting against Germany, the group noted, belonged to many different nationalities. After cataloguing the various dietary restrictions of Muslims, Sikhs, Rajputs, and Gurkhas, the outline recommended, “When possible, the prisoners should be allowed to slaughter and prepare their own meat” in addition to baking their own bread. Indians should also do the work of preparing food for their sick comrades receiving treatment in hospitals. Apart from the Sikhs, Indians were “very fond of tobacco, which they both smoke and chew.” As a further general rule, the Intelligence Office noted, “Indians are extremely sensitive. Above all, therefore, avoid anything that might offend their sense of honor.” The prisoners should be provided with warm clothes and wool blankets. Upon their capture, Indians should be given their own accommodations and segregated from other, non-Indian prisoners. In December, Oppenheim and his team even outlined plans for the handling of Indian soldiers who died in captivity. Muslims, they noted, should be given their own burial place and Hindus should have their remains burned.\textsuperscript{626}

Yet by the end of 1914, it became clear to Oppenheim at the Foreign Office that military authorities had yet to settle on a coherent plan for the handling of North African and Indian troops beyond scattering them to various prison camps and hospitals. To the Baron and his band of revolutionaries at the Intelligence Office for the East, Germany

\textsuperscript{625} PAAA R21244, Ibid.
\textsuperscript{626} PAAA R21244, “Verpflegung und Behandlung der indischen Gefangenen,” December 31, 1914.
risked squandering a unique opportunity to foment rebellion in the colonies of its imperial rivals. “Winter is approaching,” he pointed out. “The longer the [Muslim and Indian] prisoners are treated as enemies and left with other prisoners the more difficult it will be to use them later on for our interests.” In late November, Oppenheim recommended that the military concentrate all North African and Indian prisoners of war (alongside Russian Tartars and Georgians) in a modest prison camp 50 kilometers south of Berlin, at Zossen. The camp already housed 400 North Africans by then, and the site itself offered a number of logistical benefits. Situated near a major railway hub, it would be easy for Har Dayal, Virendranath Chattophadhyaya and other members of the Indian Independence Committee to travel to the camp and visit Indian prisoners. Oppenheim insisted that military authorities grant them full access to the camp. “My Indian friends are anxious to get to work,” he wrote. “They have been waiting some time for a chance to leave for Constantinople and Afghanistan, as well as to visit with their Indian comrades in a concentration camp, and they are growing impatient and starting to lose heart.”

Oppenheim also believed that Germany had to act quickly in order to counteract any lingering good-will Indian troops had developed for England during their deployment in Europe. The British, he learned, were making every accommodation for the Indian troops, “whom they so desperately need on all of the warfronts.” England had agreed to increase the pension of retired Indian soldiers, and Indian soldiers were for the first time eligible for the Victoria Cross (the highest British military decoration). Meanwhile, the Indian Soldier’s Fund had already raised more than two million Marks in its effort to

627 PAAA R21244, Oppenheim to Zimmerman, November 13, 1914.
628 PAAA R21244, memo from Oppenheim, November 25, 1914.
629 PAAA R21244, Oppenheim to the Foreign Office, December 31, 1914.
provide supplies to Indian soldiers in the field as well as those in specialized hospitals. The King had paid a visit to Indians at the front, and in the Indian hospitals, special facilities catered to the religious and dietary needs of the troops. “In light of these well-designed efforts by the English,” Oppenheim emphasized, “the good treatment of Indian prisoners on our part is of the utmost importance.”

When the order to hold all Muslim, Indian and Georgian prisoners at Zossen finally came down on January 21, 1915, authorities had to rush to make sure they had the facilities for thousands of prisoners. “Muslim and Indian prisoners should be brought just as quickly as possible to the camps at [Zossen] after their capture,” Oppenheim wrote.

As of December 1914, Zossen housed a total of 5204 Muslim prisoners, of whom only 18 were Indians. By the close of January 1915, the population of Indians in the camp had grown to 84 Muslim troops and 295 Sikhs and Hindus. At its maximum occupancy, Zossen housed roughly 14,000 Russian, African, and Indian troops. Russian prisoners of war had their own camp, the Tatarenlager, while French Muslim prisoners and Indian prisoners were held at Wünsdorf, generally referred to as the Halbmondslager (Crescent Moon Camp). Most Indian prisoners, including Sikhs and Hindus, were eventually confined to their own section, the Inderlager.

Authorities at the camp provided many of the amenities Oppenheim suggested. Construction of a small mosque began almost immediately, catching the attention of the

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630 PAAA R21244, Oppenheim to the Foreign Office, December 31, 1914.
631 PAAA R21245, plan for the handling of Muslim and Indian prisoners, February 27, 1915.
634 Höpp, Muslime in der Mark, 39.
Kaiser who agreed to contribute the 45,000 M. required for its completion.\textsuperscript{635} Camp authorities permitted Muslim soldiers to observe the fast of Ramadan.\textsuperscript{636} Indian prisoners, meanwhile, had license to celebrate their own particular festivals and feasts. The Turkish cultural ministry in Constantinople donated a number of Korans and other Islamic literature to Oppenheim. Members of the Indian Independence Committee then distributed these materials to Muslim prisoners at Zossen.\textsuperscript{637} The camp offered a coffee stand and gramophone for North African prisoners.\textsuperscript{638} After one visit in January 1915 with a small number of Gurkhas, Rajputs, one Sikh and one Pathan, the Indian Committee reported that the soldiers wanted more bread, butter, rice and vegetables. Tobacco and “something to read,” they added, would also please the prisoners. Many of the prisoners, the Indian Committee added, had enjoyed the opportunity while in France to write to their families and hoped to continue sending letters home from prison.\textsuperscript{639} “It will likely serve our own interests to see to it that these small requests are met as soon as possible,” Oppenheim stipulated.\textsuperscript{640}

J.B. Jackson of the American Embassy in Berlin visited the Indian prisoners of war camp at Zossen on July 7, 1915 and found that the troops were satisfied with the arrangements. At Wünsdorf, he reported, a new camp had been built by the side of the camp for French Muslim soldiers that held 400 Indian soldiers and four officers in five

\textsuperscript{635} PAAA R21245, Nadolny to the Foreign Office, March 27, 1915.
\textsuperscript{636} PAAA R21250, Report on the observance of Ramadan at the Halbmondrlager, July 25, 1915.
\textsuperscript{637} PAAA R21245, plan for the handling of Muslim and Indian prisoners, February 27, 1915.
\textsuperscript{638} PAAA R21246, undated, untitled document.
\textsuperscript{639} PAAA R21244, Report on January 4, 1915 visit to Zossen by members of the Indian Independence Committee.
\textsuperscript{640} PAAA R21244, Oppenheim to the Foreign Office, February 4, 1915.
separate barracks: one for 95 Muslim Baluchis, two others for 160 Ghurkas, a fourth for 65 Sikhs, including one officer, and a fifth for 71 Thakurs. Jackson spoke with the officers, “and each said that he preferred to remain in this camp, where he could be near and care for his men, and none of them wish, at present, to be transferred to an officers’ camp.” None of the barracks appeared to be overcrowded, nor were the Indians called on to do any work outside the camp and the soldiers had use of the “well-arranged” baths in the neighboring Muslim camp. “The mosque in that camp is to be dedicated next week, and thereafter the Indian Mahommedans will use it as a place of worship.” Jackson added that there were four kitchens in the Indian camp, “one each for the Mahommedans, Ghurkas, Sikhs, and Thakurs, and each sect is allowed to prepare its food according to its own ritual.” There were no armed German guards in the camp itself, and the non-commissioned officers who attended to its administration “are very considerate of the feelings of the Indians and do not go into their kitchens or the prayer section of the Mahommedan barracks.” Jackson closed his report adding that the health of the camp was good and “all in the camp seemed to be in good spirits.”

In addition to meeting the “small requests” of Indian prisoners at Zossen, the Germans developed a robust propaganda campaign to convince Muslim soldiers, North African and Indian alike, to renounce their allegiance to the British and French empires. “Everything should be done to impress upon the prisoners that we are not their enemies,” Oppenheim wrote, “and that it is only because of circumstance that we find ourselves

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641 TNA PRO 383/65, Report by Mr. Jackson on Visit to Indian Prisoners of War Camp at Wünsdorf (Zossen).
Ottoman officials and religious leaders delivered frequent lectures focused on the glory of the former Islamic Empire, the history of various Islamic peoples, exchange and interaction between the Orient and the Occident, the political, economic, and intellectual strength of Germany, and wartime relationships between Germany and Muslim territories. While Muslim prisoners celebrated the festival of Beiram in 1916, speakers told them “this war would end in a victory to the Turks and Germans” and that the prisoners “had been deceived by the enemies of Islam.” In early 1915, the first edition of *El Djihad*, a newspaper for interned Muslim North African and Indian soldiers, came off the presses. It included articles from “important” Muslim newspapers from Constantinople and India that addressed military and political aspects of the war. Oppenheim hoped that by bringing French, Indian and Russian Muslims together and impressing upon them pan-Islamic ideas, Zossen would serve German and Ottoman interests down the line by forming new networks of allies and agents among the prisoners.

Propaganda at Zossen also appealed to the camp’s non-Muslim Indian population. Oppenheim reminded military authorities early on that there were a significant number of Hindus and Sikhs among the Indian troops for whom pan-Islamic ideas would be of no appeal. Indeed, the majority of captured Indian troops in Germany were non-Muslim. “It is in our interests,” Oppenheim instructed, “to develop Muslim and Hindu elements

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642 PAAA R21245, plan for the handling of Muslim and Indian prisoners, February 27, 1915.
643 PAAA R21245, Ibid.
645 PAAA R21245, plan for the handling of Muslim and Indian prisoners, February 27, 1915.
together.” This, he conceded, was not so easily accomplished, “but if handled delicately, cultivating both elements is possible.” The work of “converting” Indian prisoners fell mainly to members of the Indian Committee. Taraknath Das, Virendranath Chattopadhyaya, and Maharaj Narayan Kaul had permanent passes to the camp. Missionary Graetsch compiled a book of common Urdu and Hindi phrases in German for use by the German guards at Zossen. In September 1915, a group of prisoners took a tour of Berlin intended to impress the men with German “order, authority, and power.” In November 1915, a member of the Indian Committee delivered a lecture at Zossen for the Indian troops on the “political geography” of India, concluding on the subject of: “The people of India, their essential unity in spite of apparent diversity of races and creeds.” He repeated this theme in a second lecture, delivered later that month.

Pamphlets and newspapers played a prominent role in the propaganda campaign aimed at Indian troops. Some appealed directly to pan-Islamic ideas. Others reveal Germany and Ghadar’s shared assumption – somewhat erroneously it turned out - that all sepoys could become converted revolutionaries, irrespective of race or caste and country of origin (Nepal, for instance, in the case of Gurkhas). Starting in 1915, the Indian Committee began publishing Hindostan, a propaganda newspaper for Indian soldiers. Printed in Urdu and Hindi and edited by Ferdinand Graetsch, Dr. Mansur and Virendranath Chattopadhyaya, one edition of the newspaper touched on anything from

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646 PAAA R21245, Ibid.
647 PAAA R21252, Indian Independence Committee to the Foreign Office, December 18, 1915.
648 PAAA R21244, note from Oppenheim, January 27, 1915.
650 PAAA R21252, outline of the first lecture by Mr. Dutt, November 17, 1915.
651 PAAA R21252, substance of the second lecture by Mr. B.N. Dutt, November 30, 1915.
“English misrule in India” and a general uprising in India, to actions taken by Indian soldiers in the English army to carry out the jihad. Cheaply and quickly printed leaflets reinforced the message. “Never forget about your oppression by the English,” ran the headline of one, “the time for revenge is now.” English rule had been marked by unspeakable cruelties ever since England imposed its will on India in 1857. “The English are the true barbarians,” the leaflet concluded, “cruel and bloodthirsty.”

The testimonies of repatriated Indian prisoners of war reveal that Germany’s propaganda campaign was relentless. It began, in fact, from the moment of capture. Subadar-Major Sher Singh Rana of the 1/4th Gurkha Rifles testified that he first encountered members of the Indian Committee at La Bassée:

One was from Baroda, probably a Mahratta. … The other was a Sikh of Hoshiapur, but his hair and his beard clipped. … I do not know the names of either. I was threatened by these men and they made attempts at Lille to seduce Indian soldiers.

At Zossen, he claimed, the Germans attempted to “corrupt” Indians at every turn.

Walter visited it, and there were other sedition agents there, e.g. Ram Singh, a Sikh, (but with his hair clipped) of Rawalpindi, a ‘bara badmash.’ Walter was responsible there for distributing the ‘Ghadr’ newspaper among Indian soldiers.

Sepoy Mahomed Arifan, captured in November 1914 at Ypres, was interned at Zossen until August 1915 when the Germans deported him to a prison camp at Görlitz. There, he befriended British Sergeant J.P. Walsh of the 1/Gloucester Regiment and revealed:

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652 PAAA R21256, report on contents of Hindostan.
653 PAAA R21245, “Never forget about your oppression by the English,” undated.
654 TNA FO 383/390, sworn statement of Subadar-Major Sher Singh Rana 1/4th Gurkha Rifles.
655 TNA FO 383/390, Ibid.
At first [the Indian soldiers] were well treated [at Zossen], but the camp was overrun with Mahommedan propagandists, Turks, Fakirs, and what not, who tried by every means to influence the Indian soldiers to break their allegiance to the British Empire.\textsuperscript{656}

The Germans hoped that their propaganda campaign in Zossen could also produce “converts” to their cause among the Indian ranks still fighting on the Western Front. In December 1914, Paul Walter requested that a few captured Indians work with him in Lille. “It is important to try and influence new arrivals from the very outset,” he wrote to Oppenheim. “Then when they are ready, they will return to their tribal brethren in the enemy lines at night, or in some other suitable way.”\textsuperscript{657} Airships and balloons facilitated the process, dropping leaflets and propaganda over the lines occupied by Muslim soldiers.\textsuperscript{658} At the Censor’s Office in France, E.B. Howell knew plainly that the Germans were attempting to use their operations at Zossen to win over Indians still fighting on the Western Front and in other theaters. Letters and postcards written by Indian prisoners of war in Germany revealed that the Germans were “anxious to impress upon the Indian troops in the field the good treatment which their fellows who have been taken prisoner are receiving in Germany.” He also warned, “[The Germans] have lately been distributing over that part of the line held by the Indian troops leaflets with pictures of the Indian prisoners’ camps, and information about the number of prisoners, guns taken, and the extent of territory conquered by the German army.”\textsuperscript{659}

\textsuperscript{656} TNA FO 383/390, Treatment of Indian Prisoners at Zossen and Goerlitz, statement of Sergeant J.P. Walsh, 1/Gloucester Regiment, obtained by Major M. Wylie, 1/4 Gurkha Rifles, 6 March 1918.
\textsuperscript{657} PAAA R21244, letter to Oppenheim, December 12, 1914.
\textsuperscript{658} PAAA R21244, Foreign Office memo by Baron von Oppenheim, October 1914.
\textsuperscript{659} IOR L/MIL/17347, Communication from E.B. Howell, October 21, 1915.
German activities at Zossen also featured prominently in propaganda campaigns intended for audiences abroad. Well-staged visits from prominent Ottoman officials and Muslim leaders provided the Germans with an opportunity to impress prisoner and ally alike with Germany’s commitment to the Holy War.\textsuperscript{660} "The prison for Muslim soldiers in Wuensdorf, by Berlin, was visited by some of the most exalted people of the Muslim world over the course of the last few days," reported the \textit{Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger} in April 1915, including a famous Muslim writer, publisher, and member of the Egyptian national party.\textsuperscript{661} German publications played up the good treatment Muslim soldiers received in articles specially prepared for Arabic, Turkish, Persian, and Indian newspapers, although those working in the Intelligence Office for the East readily admitted that they were not doing enough of this to counter British and French propaganda in the Muslim world.\textsuperscript{662} In fact, the interests of the Indian Independence Committee and the German Reich frequently parted ways on this point. In June 1915, a photograph of members of the Indian Committee visiting the prison camp at Döbritz appeared in the \textit{Deutsche Kurier} and the \textit{Deutsche Illustrierte Zeitung}. The Indian Committee wrote a letter of protest to the Foreign Office

\begin{quote}
We beg, to bring it to your notice as well, that such photographs circumscribe the sphere of our activity very much. They prevent our members from going to India, where the chief work is done, and secondly they enable the English Govt. to hinder our work in neutral countries, where we may like to establish our centers.\textsuperscript{663}
\end{quote}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{660} PAAA R21245, note on request by Turkish Lieutenant to visit Zossen, January 30, 1915.
\item \textsuperscript{661} "Bei den mohammedanischen Kriegsgefangenen," \textit{Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger}, April 1915.
\item \textsuperscript{662} PAAA R21245, from the Nachrichtenstelle to the Foreign Office, April 7, 1915.
\item \textsuperscript{663} PAAA R21247, Report of a visit to Doebritz, June 22, 1915.
\end{itemize}
Germany’s efforts at Zossen earned minor accolades in the newspapers of some neutral countries, but nothing significant enough to tip the scales of popular opinion in Germany’s favor. Dutch newspapers reported favorably on the good treatment Muslim soldiers received in the Halbmondalager, applauding that Germany built at its own expense a mosque for the prisoners. Other newspapers were not so easily impressed. In Switzerland, Volksrecht reminded readers on November 3, 1917, “It may be remembered that from the very outbreak of war, official Germany suddenly discovered an extraordinary sympathy for Revolution, but for revolution only in foreign countries.” As for captured Muslim soldiers,

Enthusiasm for the “Holy War” was to be nourished by work in the prisoners’ camps. They were “wild men” so long as they served in the armies of France, England and Russia, an outrage to European culture but quite good enough to take part in official Germany’s mission of liberation and culture.

While propaganda for North African and Indian troops fomented revolution, the internment of so many colonial subjects from the British and French empires at Zossen intensified racial hierarchies and many of the stereotypes that justified imperial rule. The First World War coincided with the heyday of German (and American) racial science. Racial hygienists combined pseudo-science with social Darwinism, classified and isolated “desirable” and “undesirable” racial characteristics, and proscribed plans for improving the biology of the human species. At the time of Senator Beveridge’s visit to Zossen, there were nearly 12,000 prisoners in the camp, most of them Russian and

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664 “Duitschland en de Oosterlingen,” [newspaper title illegible], November 21, 1915, in PAAA R21254.
665 IOR L/MIL/7/18480, translations of articles from “Volksrecht” of November 3 and 5, 1917.
French. There were also, by his count, just shy of 400 Indians and 30 Englishmen. His description of a conversation with Indian prisoners reproduced a host of orientalist tropes about India’s martial races.

In the barracks occupied by the prisoners from India there is an unusual feature: every Hindu cook and in every way prepares his own food, for he will not eat anything touched by Christian hands. Many of them were observed at this private and religious culinary occupation. The Gourka sergeant in charge of this barrack, spoke English very well. He and his comrades were treated very well, he said – much better than they expected.

Would he like to get back to India? He would – more than anything.

Why had he come to the war?

“Orders, sir”

He good-naturedly interpreted for a group of tall, grave-faced Sikhs, statues of dignity and gravity.

Why had they come so far to fight?

“The service” was the answer; and the Gourkha sergeant tried to make their meaning clear by such expressions as “their duty” [“their profession”, “their business”. As to wanting to go home, we gathered that they were quite indifferent, that it was all the same to them, and that they took things as they happened.  

The “gravity” and “dignity” of the sepoys stood in stark contrast to the North African prisoners the Senator visited next.

In the barracks where the Turcos lived, came the one disagreeable, even shocking surprise of the day. It is impossible to imagine more villainous looking creatures. Nearly all of them are small men, and most of them have viciousness stamped on every feature.

Their evil eyes follow you expressionless, unblinking, like those of a serpent. Some of

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these men undoubtedly are criminals – the forehead, jaw, mouth, back head, and above all the merciless, soulless eyes spell depravity. The Sikhs and Gourkas from India, many of whom have fine and even noble features, and infinitely superior to this scum of Northern Africa; for such at least most of these particular Turcos must be. There are some faces among them that are not bad; but, most of them justify the harshest description. It is not thinkable that these are fair samples of the inhabitants of northern Africa.668

Depictions of Indian prisoners of war in German publications oscillated freely between “exotic” and “savage.” The Täglische Rundschau described a collection of Indian prisoners taken during the fighting at Festubert in December 1914. “We have here a mixed collection of Muslims and Hindus,” the newspaper read, from Mongolian Gurkhas of the Himalayas to towering Sikhs, “a warrior caste whose hair has never been touched by a pair of scissors.”669 When military authorities at Zossen completed construction of the mosque in the summer of 1915, the Berliner Tageblatt reported on the pending inauguration of this “strange looking [building] on the soil of Germany” for “our oriental enemies fighting for France and England.”670 In the summer of 1915, the Vossische Zeitung noted that “the menu of people” interned at Zossen “was colorful enough.” Yet racist fears of the colonial “savage” lurked beneath this fascination with the “exotic.” The newspaper took care to add that a triple-reinforced barbed wire fence enclosed the camp’s 14,000 inmates and guard towers equipped with machineguns kept careful watch over the troops.671 A 1915 book, Die Kriegsgefangenen in Deutschland, featured 14 photographs of Asian and African soldiers, the “rabble against which Germany must fight.” The book continued, “The thought of a highly educated, hopeful

668 Ibid.
671 Vossische Zeitung, n.d.
German brother meeting his end by the bullet or knife of these hordes must fill one with bitterness and anger.**672 In his 1916 book, *Unsere Feinde*, German officer Otto Stiehl provided a number of portrait photographs of the different “races” interned in German prison camps. He wrote,

> The mixture of tribes and races mobilized by our enemies from all five continents to fight on the old soil of Europe is outrageous, far surpassing anything ever seen before in world history.**673

The intensification of racial stereotypes and racial hierarchies received official sanction in Germany. In 1915, the Kaiser approved the establishment of the Royal Prussian Phonographic Commission, a group of ethnologists, linguists and anthropologists led by Wilhelm Doegen, committed to recording the whole range of languages housed in German prison camps. Anthropologists, meanwhile, sent students into the prison camps to perform various body measurements and to collect photographs of captives so that Germany’s enemies could be categorized “scientifically” from a “racial” perspective.**674 “They are usually large, well-built and lean people,” commented one interrogator after interviewing a group of captured Indians in late November 1914. “They make a cheerful, almost childish impression and they are very trusting, especially when you give them cigarettes.”**675

**672 Professor Dr. Backhaus, *Die Kriegsgefangenen in Deutschland* (Siegen, Leipzig, Berlin: Verlag Hermann Montanus, 1915), 23.
674 Heather Jones, “Imperial Captives,” in Das, Race, Empire and First World War Writing, 179.
675 PAAA R21244, report on an interview with captured Indians conducted in Lille, November 30, 1914.
For Germans and Ghadar revolutionaries at the Foreign Office, each Indian captured by the German army represented a possible “convert,” a soldier they might persuade to renounce all allegiance to the British Empire and take up arms to ensure its downfall. Combining pan-Islamic appeals with revolutionary nationalism, propagandists set to work on Indian prisoners of war long before the sepoys even reached Zossen. Nonetheless, the prison camp 50 kilometers south of Berlin was the nucleus of Germany’s plan to foment rebellion in India. It is somewhat ironic therefore, that depictions of Indian prisoners of war in publications intended for German audiences intensified many of the same racial stereotypes used to justify European imperial rule overseas. As for the Indian prisoners, they responded to German and Ghadar propaganda in a variety of ways.

**Collaboration and Resistance in Zossen**

Sefoys interned in prison camps scattered throughout the Reich had a choice to make. They could renounce all allegiance to the British Empire and collaborate with their captors, or they could stubbornly resist and remain true to the British King-Emperor. Both options, collaboration and resistance, were fraught with considerable risk. Collaborators risked ostracism or physical violence from a resentful peer group, death on another battlefront, or a lengthy prison sentence if the Germans lost the war. As for the risks that came from resisting, the power imbalance between an unarmed and isolated Indian prisoner of war thousands of miles from home and his German captors could not have been more readily apparent. A number of sepoys freely collaborated with their captors. Others resisted. Some even navigated a third avenue, alternatively collaborating
and resisting. Drawing on underutilized sources – principally, the testimonies and letters written by Indian soldiers interned deep within the German Reich – this dissertation offers a unique and fresh perspective on the way imperial rivalry shaped the landscape on which imperial subalterns made choices during the First World War. The coping strategies employed by soldiers interned deep within the German Reich reveals that even the war’s most vulnerable subalterns were able to leverage imperial rivalries to some modicum of advantage for themselves.

At the end of Ramadan on October 20, 1915, the Muslim soldiers in Zossen celebrated the Bairam Feast. As German camp authorities handed out cigarettes, sugar, and tea, the Turkish ambassador watched as a procession of the first battalion of 900 North African Freiwilliger (volunteers) for the Holy War marched through the camp to the sound of drums and horns. “The course of the festival can be described as entirely successful,” wrote one German witness. “It should have a good influence on the mood of the prisoners.”676 The first detachments of the volunteer battalion departed for Constantinople later that November. A German agent awaiting their departure for Constantinople wrote, “We can expect the number of volunteers to increase considerably once preparations are underway for their departure.”677 Indeed by January 1916, another 1400 Russian Muslims had joined Freiwilliger battalions.678 Then, in early March, 41 Afridi volunteers left Zossen for Turkey. “It will be remembered, however,” noted the

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676 PAAA R21252, report on the Bairam Feast at Zossen, October 25, 1915.
677 PAAA R21252, letter from von Ramsay to von Lossow, November 9, 1915.
678 PAAA R21253, Foreign Office internal memo, January 20, 1916.
Indian Independence Committee, “that there are three other men … to whom the promise has been made that they would be sent with the Mohammedan soldiers.”

Now these men are aware that the Mohammadan soldiers have left today, and there is not only the danger that they will lose faith in the promises of the German Government, but they and all the other soldiers will begin to feel that the only reason for not sending the three above-mentioned men is that they are Hindus. The position in the Lager, therefore, is a very serious one.679

The three men did join other Indian Freiwilliger in the Middle East eventually, bringing the total to 44.680

German wartime policy created a space where imperial subalterns could actively contribute to the downfall of the French, Russian and British empires. In the summer of 1915, a small group of sepoys joined an ill-fated expedition to Kabul, Afghanistan. Later that year, the Germans prepared to deploy entire volunteer battalions to various fronts. North Africans would go to Turkey to fight for the Ottomans in the Middle East, Georgians would go to the Caucasus to foment a rebellion against Russian rule, and Indians would travel to South Asia to do the same against English rule. Camp instructions written in late 1915 stipulated that as a prerequisite for each of these operations, the soldiers had to volunteer freely – they could not be conscripted.681 Most of the prisoners of war interned at Zossen were Muslim, but the Germans tried to create opportunities for all prisoners at the camp to take up arms against their imperial overlords. Military authorities considered it especially important to make a good impression on the Gurkhas and Punjabis, for instance. “They certainly could not be compelled to fight against their

680 PAAA R21254, list of Indians sent to Turkey on March 3, 1916.
681 PAAA R21252, instructions for propaganda camps, 1915.
fellow tribesmen,” read one report, but certainly could help stir up rebellion once they reached India.682

Indian prisoners of war may have been willing to fight for the Central Powers for a host of reasons. Some told members of the Indian Independence Committee that they “felt betrayed by the English.”683 One group of soldiers captured in late 1914 told Dr. Mansur, “They embarked at Karachi and other ports without knowing where they were going or for what purpose. They believed only that they were being brought to another Indian garrison.” When they reached the Western Front, “They were placed at the forefront of the battle and ruthlessly sacrificed.” One soldier noted that out of an original contingent of 500 men in his regiment, only 200 remained.684 Feelings of betrayal at the hands of the English made some Indian prisoners especially receptive to Ghadar’s revolutionary propaganda. When members of the Indian Committee learned that a “very patriotic” Sikh Havaldar, Bhag Singh, was in an Officers’ Camp somewhere, they requested that military authorities transfer the soldier to Zossen where he could act as a liaison between Ghadar and other prisoners.685 Deserter s from the 58th Rifles told members of the Indian Committee that dissatisfaction with the English was widespread in the Indian ranks generally and the Indian frontier especially. The Afridis insisted that even the hint of movement from the Emir of Afghanistan “would be enough to cause serious outbreak amongst all troops” stationed on the Afghan frontier. “On this point they seem to be quite certain.” The Indian Independence Committee concluded that the men

682 PAAA R21245, report on visit to the Halbmondlager, February 20, 1915.
684 PAAA R21244, Ibid.
were “trustworthy people & may without any fear of betrayal be utilized to the advantage of German-Turkish interests.”

Other prisoners of war may have been hedging their bets, siding with the Germans and Ottomans because that was who they believed would win the war. The subject of Germany in the war was, after all, a major topic of propaganda at Zossen. When volunteer Bahadur Khan reached Constantinople in 1916, he wrote to a comrade still interned at Zossen, “There are one million Turkish soldiers in Constantinople.” Another 10 million were on their way to the front. In another letter, he emphasized that the Turkish army “has not suffered many losses in the war.” Volunteer Mir Ala Khan wrote to Adal Beg Khan that the “12000 English soldiers defeated by the Turks,” presumably at the siege of Kut-el-Amara in Mesopotamia, “are all prisoners or have been killed.” A third volunteer wrote to a friend at Zossen that in all of India, “unrest prevails.” Everywhere Indians were beginning to realize just how poorly they were treated by the English whose soldiers earned 40 rupees, compared to the 11 earned by Indians.

Some sepoys seemed particularly enthusiastic at the prospects of participating in the Holy War. One group of Afridi Volunteers explained that they were “ready to be the champions of their religion and their land in order to end British rule in India.” A group of wounded Indian prisoners recuperating at a hospital in Coblenz reported that upon learning about the jihad at the front, they told their British officers that they refused to fight against the “true friends” of the Turks. The British officers, for their part, tried to

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686 PAAA R21245, handwritten notes on interview with soldiers of 58th Rifles by unidentified member of Indian Independence Committee, March 1915.
687 PAAA R21256, letter from Mir Ala Khan.
688 PAAA R21256, undated letter from Sher Ali to Ram Anand Takur.
689 PAAA R21250, Graetsch to the Foreign Office, August 9, 1915.
convince the sepoys that the Germans were Europeans and therefore not Muslim. “Under threat,” their interrogator wrote in his report, “they were forced to advance” against the Germans. 690 “As Muslims they feel as one with the Turks,” he added, and they viewed the Germans as comrades, “although admitted that they do not know much about us yet.” 691

It is difficult to say for certain whether Germany’s Indian volunteers really were committed revolutionaries and jihadists. To be sure, some sepoys went to great lengths to convince their captors that they were fervent converts. Military authorities concluded upon interrogating recently captured Afghan soldier Mohamed Arifan in January 1915 that the “devout Muslim” would “be pleased to fight with the Turks against their enemies.” 692 A native of Peshawar, near the Khyber Pass, Arifan joined the Indian army 14 years prior and served in the 127th Baluchis. Prior to the outbreak of the First World War, he fought in an operation in Somaliland and had been wounded. Arifan assured his German captors that Afghan soldiers had no particular fondness for the British Empire and joined the ranks of the Indian Army only because it provided a reliable source of income. “The Indian Army is able to recruit a lot of Afghans,” he told his German interrogator, “because they are paid well.” With the outbreak of war in 1914, the 900 men in his regiment received their orders to embark. After one month and 10 days at sea, he and some 50,000 other Indian soldiers arrived at Marseilles, where “we learned for the first time that we were going to be deployed against Germany in the war.” Arifan and his regiment fought at La Bassée. “I was wounded in the first battle,” he recalled, and many

690 PAAA R21245, interview with wounded Indian prisoners in Coblenz hospital, March 5, 1915.
691 PAAA R21245, ibid.
692 PAAA R21245, summary of interrogation of Mohamed Arefin, January 20, 1915.
of his fellow countrymen ran when they spotted the Germans, “because they did not want to fight against our friends, the Germans.” This comment ought to have left Arifan’s interrogator scratching his head in disbelief: the sepoy claimed that at the time of his capture, he and his Muslim comrades were not yet aware of the Holy War against Russia, England and France. “I am confident that when the Muslim soldiers fighting in the English army learn about the Holy War,” he said, “they will no longer fight against the Germans but against their true enemies.”

If the story Arifan told the Germans does not quite add up, comparing his testimony with that of a British prisoner of war interned with Arifan suggests the sepoy only told the Germans what he thought they wanted to hear. Sergeant J.P. Walsh of the 1/Gloucester Regiment was interned at Görlitz, Poland when sepoy Mahomed Arifan arrived there from Zossen in late November 1915. “He is a native of Lundi near Peshawar, and prided himself on being a Pathan,” Walsh told a fellow British prisoner of war in 1918. The Sergeant testified that he “took charge of [Arifan] from the moment of his arrival, and he became devoted to me during the 17 months we were together in Görlitz.” Arifan assured Sergeant Walsh that Germany’s attempts to convert the sepoys were a complete failure,

… and as a result the Germans systematically persecuted them by every means, withdrew the sanction hitherto accorded to caste feeling, and finally sent away from Zossen those who stood out firmest, and were most influential among their fellows in preserving loyalty to the King-Emperor.

In 1916, Sergeant Walsh wrote on Arifan’s behalf to his brother in Lundi and to the Prisoners of War Aid Society in Southampton, England to get his name put on the list for

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693 PAAA R21245, ibid.
care parcels. “After this he received clothing, boots, food, etc., regularly from the Society. His family also sent him money, food, etc., from Lundi.” During his 17 months at Görlitz, Arifan “bore himself well, and is a credit to the Indian Army.” For his own part, Sergeant Walsh “always assured him that the British Government would not forget his loyalty and that of his comrades at Zossen.” Walsh concluded:

[Arifan] was intensely proud of being a British subject. He was frequently placed in prison for refusing to work for the Germans, and the last I saw of him was when he was sent away in March 1917 to Königsbruck to look after an elephant, but he told me he would continue to refuse to do any work for the Germans. 694

We cannot discount the possibility that some sepoys volunteered for Germany’s Indian battalion out of a desire to bring revolution to the gates of India. Yet the curious case of sepoy Mahomed Arifan suggests that Indian coverts who spouted about jihad and toppling British rule may have only been telling the Germans what they wanted to hear, revealing that Indian prisoners of war were adept at harnessing the rivalry of the British and German empires to some modicum of advantage for themselves. But if not to end the British Empire in India, the question then remains: what did prisoners of war hope to gain by fighting for the Germans?

Many prisoners of war likely volunteered to fight for the Germans and Ottomans because the Central Powers paid well. Ostensibly, North African soldiers who volunteered to fight for the Ottomans retained the ranks they held while serving in the French army. Drilled in the camp in Arabic, the soldiers enjoyed extra rations of tobacco. The Germans also told them they would be eligible for medals, recognitions, and perhaps

694 TNA FO 383/390, Treatment of Indian Prisoners at Zossen and Goerlitz, statement of Sergeant J.P. Walsh, 1/Gloucester Regiment, obtained by Major M. Wylie, 1/4 Gurkha Rifles, March 6, 1918.
even a pension: “It would make it easier to motivate the soldiers if they did not have to speculate about whether they were going to receive a pension,” read one memo. A small group of recently captured Indian soldiers told members of the Indian Independence Committee, “They fought for England because of the money, and would, for the same reason, be willing to fight for the Germans.” When Havildar Khan Gull reached Constantinople in 1916 with the Indian volunteers, he wrote to Adal Beg Khan still interned at Zossen: “You must choose the same path.” Many Indians had gathered in Constantinople, he said. One soldier had already gotten married, and “if any of us wants land, a house, horses, and oxen are all made available.” Volunteer Sher Ali wrote to Ram Anand Takur about Constantinople, “Every Muslim who wants to come here will be greeted as a friend.” The men could go where they wanted and made good money.

Economic considerations weighed especially heavy on many of the Indian prisoners who joined the volunteer battalion. Soldiers who deserted from the front forfeited any and all pay, pension and social status guaranteed by the British Empire. Of the 44 volunteers, three were Sikhs. Mita Singh deserted his post at the front, Hardas Singh shot his British officer and then deserted, and Shemir Singh revealed only that he feared what the British might do to him if he ever fell back into their hands. Many of the deserters of the 58th Rifles voiced enthusiasm initially at joining the Indian battalion. One member of the Indian Independence Committee reminded camp authorities in late

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695 PAAA R21252, instructions for propaganda camps, 1915.
697 PAAA R21256, undated letter from Havildar Khan Gull to Adal Beg Khan.
698 PAAA R21256, undated letter from Sher Ali to Ram Anand Takur.
May 1915 that the Afridis “deserted their ranks, & this ruined their future prospects entirely.” They were, moreover,
extrremely dissatisfied with the present treatment accorded to them. … [T]hey were induced to fly from the English side, by the pamphlets distributed among them by the Germans themselves. 700
The Committee asked the Foreign Office to tell camp authorities at Zossen to treat the Afridis as friends, “and not like the other prisoners of war.”

These soldiers also volunteered for the Indian battalion and the Afghanistan expedition because the ventures offered, in effect, a one-way ticket home. The Indian Committee reported in early 1915 that Indian prisoners “want to return to India as soon as possible and they were very sad when we told them that they might still have to wait a year for peace. All of them were married with several children.” 701 In the summer of 1915, five Afridis from 58th Rifles traveled to Constantinople with the German missionary Ferdinand Graetsch and joined the expedition to Afghanistan. 702 The men asked that the Germans supply them with money, medals and documents bearing the seal of the German government, anything that could account for their unexpected return. One of the men told the German missionary:

When we at last get back to our homeland, and tell our tribesmen about our experiences in Germany and tell them how good we were treated in Germany and that we did not have to cover any of the expense of traveling to Constantinople so that we could fight for our faith, who knows if they will believe us. If we could show them a medal or document...

701 PAAA R21245, notes from interview with Afridi deserters, March 1915.
702 They were, according to German records: Mir Kasim, Gul Haider, Baghi Schah, Lawang and Dir Muhammad.
from the government, then no one would dare to doubt our story, and all would believe
that Germany is not just the friend of Muslims, but of Afridis as well.\textsuperscript{703}

But it is just as likely that the desire to return home kept many Indian prisoners of
war out of the ranks of the volunteer battalion. Indians from the Northwest Frontier and
trans-border Pathans had been especially susceptible to recruiting efforts, read one report
on German and Ghadar efforts at Zossen. The Gurkhas and Sikhs were proving far more
difficult to influence.\textsuperscript{704} Indeed, by late September 1915, camp authorities conceded that
the Indian troops as a whole were deeply divided on the question of joining the volunteer
battalions. Of the 134 Muslim Indians interned at Zossen, 67 were from the Punjab,
for whom fighting for Turkey is totally out of the question. They come from the British
territory of Punjab, their land and their families are dependent upon them [the British],
and they want to go back to India once peace has been declared.\textsuperscript{705}

Nor were Afghans and trans-border Pathans of one mind on the matter. Some Afridis
worried that if they volunteered, they risked a long prison sentence and losing their
pension if recaptured.\textsuperscript{706} A Subedar Major informed German authorities that several of
the Pathans who had deserted did so out of the hope that they might be able to return
home – not so that they could go fight in the Turkish army.\textsuperscript{707}

Germany’s sometimes single-minded enthusiasm for the Holy War may have
undermined Ghadar’s efforts at harnessing whatever appeal a pan-Indian revolution
might have had. Some Hindu soldiers expressed to members of the Indian Committee that

\textsuperscript{703} PAAA R21250, Graetsch to the Foreign Office, August 9, 1915.
\textsuperscript{704} PAAA R21246, report on the status of propaganda on Indian, Russian, and Georgian
prisoners in Zossen, April 11, 1915.
\textsuperscript{705} PAAA R21252, from the commander of Zossen prison camp to the Foreign Office,
November 18, 1915.
\textsuperscript{706} PAAA R21246, memo, May 27, 1915.
\textsuperscript{707} PAAA R21252, from the commander of Zossen prison camp to the Foreign Office,
November 18, 1915.
while they were willing to fight for India, they did not want to take up arms for Turkey or Germany.\textsuperscript{708} “We are, of course, aware that the Mohammedans are impatient to go to Turkey,” the Indian Independence Committee observed, “But our object in our propaganda among the prisoners has been to get them to accept the idea of fighting their way through Persia to India.” In fact, the Committee recommended that the Volunteers “should be sent off to Baghdad without being allowed to stop at Constantinople.” The Committee believed:

unless they were all persuaded to take part in a general patriotic scheme, the Mohammedans would merely wish to go to settle down in Turkey, which is not good for them and is not what we desire.\textsuperscript{709}

Indeed, documents reveal that by the summer of 1915, the aims of military authorities at Zossen had diverged from those of the Indian Independence Committee. After one visit in June, Committee members complained that camp propaganda focused too heavily on the Holy War and not enough on the topic of Indian nationalism. The Committee argued that any propaganda benefit to be gleaned from the Ottoman-German alliance had already run its course given that Indian soldiers had taken the field in large numbers against the Turks in the Middle East.\textsuperscript{710} It was imperative, therefore, to start cultivating and catering to Indian national sentiment in Zossen:

From the Lager authorities I have come to know that they have instructions from the General Staff to carry on propaganda only among the Mohamedans, so as to make them willingly leave for Turkey. About the Rajputs, Sikhs and Gurkhas the Lager authorities

\textsuperscript{708} PAAA R21253, Indian Independence Committee to the Foreign Office, January 9, 1915.
\textsuperscript{709} PAAA R21253, ibid.
\textsuperscript{710} PAAA R21247, report on visit by Khairi to Zossen, June 4, 1915.
are instructed to carry on such propaganda that these people will feel friendly to Germany and speak well of the German Government and people when they return to India.

If we mean seriously to organize an Indian Corps (composed of these prisoners and other Indians available in Turkey and Persia) which will march towards the Indian frontier through Persia, and if the German Government sees the feasibility and immense political and moral value of the scheme, then the Lager authorities should be asked to carry on propaganda in co-operation with the representatives of the Indian National Party, among the Sikhs, Rajputs and Gurkhas also, so that these people will volunteer for our cause.\footnote{PAAA R21253, Indian Independence Committee to the Foreign Office, January 14, 1916.}

A lack of coordination between the various parties working at Zossen may have further undermined Ghadar’s standing among the prisoners of war. When camp authorities informed 41 Afridis that they were going to be sent to Persia, they did so without first notifying the Indian Independence Committee. “We beg to express our regret that this arrangement should have been made without the knowledge of our workers in the Lager, who ought at least to have been previously informed, as has always been done when Indian soldiers were sent away,” the Committee protested.

It now makes the position of our workers delicate and difficult. The confidence which the men have in our ability to do something for them will, we fear, be shaken, when they perceive that the Afridis are being sent on the initiative of the German Authorities and without our knowledge.\footnote{PAAA R21253, Indian Independence Committee to the Foreign Office, January 12, 1916.}

By 1916, the Germans gave up trying to recruit Hindus altogether. Thereafter, German plans for Hindu soldiers amounted to nothing more than treating the soldiers well so that
when they returned to India after the war, their sympathies would lie with Germany, not England.  

Bad health care also undermined Germany’s propaganda efforts at Zossen. The testimony of Jemadar Suba Sing Gurung of the 2/2 Gurkha Rifles, offered to a British officer in 1918, suggests that poor health conditions at Zossen convinced Indian soldiers that the Germans were not worth joining. In addition to a “persistent campaign of sedition”:

The main complaint the Jemadar had against the camp… is that the water was bad, and that in consequence large numbers of men became ill, and had to go to hospital. No men were allowed to go with them as orderlies or nurses, and the result was that they rapidly became worse, and a very large percentage died. There were 52 men of the Jemadar’s regiment, 2/2nd Gurkha Rifles, taken prisoner, and of these 18 had died by April, 1917, and he states that this was not a remarkable percentage, and that from 33 to 50% of the original prisoners had certainly died. There was a good deal of tuberculosis as well, and one Subadar Prem Sing Thapa, 1/4 Gurkha Rifles, died of the disease.

German authorities acknowledged that the health conditions in the camp were not satisfactory. The internees, read one memo, “cough practically all the time. Most of the diseases [in the camp] are of the lungs. Deaths are almost all caused by pulmonary tuberculosis.” By the close of 1915, there were some 650 Indian prisoners in the camp. Soldiers told Mr. Dutt that about 40 had died that year. They also complained that they were desperately in need of warm winter clothes, and that the camp had not provided

713 PAAA R21255, Guidelines for the propaganda camp in Zossen, 1916.
714 TNA FO 383/390, Treatment of Indian Prisoners at Zossen and Goerlitz, statement of Jemadar Suba Sing Gurung, obtained by Major M. Wylie, 1/4 Gurkha Rifles, 6 March 1918.
715 PAAA R21252, report on Zossen to the Ministry of War, November 24, 1915.
them with any coal for days.\textsuperscript{716} In February 1916, the Indian Independence Committee brought to the attention of camp authorities the case of Gurkha Subadar-Major Prem Singh, “who has been ill for some time and who in our opinion should be removed as soon as possible to a hospital in or near Berlin.” The Committee warned, “This officer is highly respected and influential among the soldiers, and, if the special consideration that we are now requesting be shown to him, it will have a very good effect among them.” The camp commander asked the Subadar-Major if he would like to go to the hospital in Zossen, “but as the general belief among the soldiers is that those who go to the military hospital never return, he naturally declined.”

When another outbreak of tuberculosis began to ravage the internees at Zossen in the late spring of 1916, the Indian Independence Committee raised the alarm. “We regret very much to have to say that the prisoners have no faith in the efficacy of the medical treatment they receive. The chief reason is undoubtedly the high rate of mortality among the prisoners.” The Committee added,

We desire to produce the belief that the German Government is anxious to do all in its power for the Indian prisoners. If our suggestion [to improve conditions and send sick Indians to recuperate in Switzerland] is carried out, we shall take steps to have the facts published in India and thus counteract to some extent the attempt of the English enemy to undermine India’s pro German tendencies.\textsuperscript{717}

Documents provided by the German government to a minister of the Netherlands Legation in Berlin reveal that health conditions at the camp deteriorated markedly in mid-1916.

\textsuperscript{716} PAAA R21252, Indian Independence Committee to Foreign Office, December 23, 1915.
\textsuperscript{717} PAAA R21255, Indian Independence Committee to the Foreign Office, April 23, 1916.
Deaths in the Indian Camps

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Halbmondlager, Zossen</th>
<th>Romania</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1915</td>
<td>1916</td>
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<td>January</td>
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<td>February</td>
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<td>November</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: TNA, FO 383/406

The brutality and racism of some of the prison camp guards also deterred soldiers from collaborating with their captors. Reports filed by the Indian Independence Committee reveal that a particular Anglo-Indian (a Briton who had been born in India) guard working in the camp was especially brutal to the Indians. Soldiers told Mr. Dutt during a December 1915 visit to the camp, “They want us to believe they are good, but they are no better than the English.” The Committee requested that authorities transfer the man to another camp. “The conduct of the officer in question is not conducive to success

718 TNA, FO 383/406.
in our propaganda.”\textsuperscript{719} Despite the protest, German authorities did nothing to remove the man from the camp. In March 1916, the Committee again protested:

We find that [the guard] has in no way changed his brutal conduct nor his … language in dealings with the sepoys and even with the officers. The following are some specimens of the highly insulting language used by him without any sort of provocation:

- “Badmâsh” (You scoundrel), “Jangli” (You savage), “Suar ka bachcha” (You son of a pig), “Sala” (Fellow whose sister I have ravished), “Mâdarchôd”, “Bahanchôd” (You fellow who have committed incest with your mother, with your sister).

We beg to express our desire that this Anglo-Indian be immediately removed from the Lager, and replaced by Mr. Walter who is much liked by the soldiers by reason of his gentlemanly and sympathetic treatment of them.\textsuperscript{720}

By April 1916, things reached the breaking point and the Indian Committee threatened that unless military authorities removed the guard from Zossen, they would be unable to continue their work there. Removing the man could be done, they said, without any injury, “by transferring him to the front as a Lieutenant.” Pending his removal, the Committee added, it would be absolutely useless for the Committee to “try to do anything among the prisoners to make them believe that the Germans are really more gentlemanly and more humane than the English.”\textsuperscript{721}

Indeed, we might conclude broadly, that the longer soldiers waited in Zossen for their deployment to the Middle East, the less enthusiasm they had for the collaborating with their captors. In late 1915, camp authorities segregated the 41 Indian volunteers in their own separate barracks within the Inderlager, “resulting from, as anticipated,

\textsuperscript{719} PAAA R21252, Indian Independence Committee to Foreign Office, December 23, 1915.
\textsuperscript{720} PAAA R21254, Indian Independence Committee to Foreign Office, March 5, 1916.
\textsuperscript{721} PAAA R21256, Indian Independence Committee to Foreign Office, April 28, 1916.
complications between them and the other Indian Muslims.” It was very important to expedite the deployment of these troops to Turkey, a report noted, because these 41 soldiers, all from India’s Northwest frontier, were starting to doubt if they would ever have the chance to go. “Every day they ask when they will get to go and say that they see no end to the wait time,” it continued, “they do not want to be treated as prisoners.” The unrest of the Indian volunteers had only grown in recent days “when they saw that the field uniforms for the French Muslims had arrived.” They soldiers spoke openly about no longer wanting to go to Turkey, and instead making a break for England. “Given the especially important role these men have to play in the Holy War and in clarifying things in Afghanistan, it appears necessary to deport the Muslim Indians along with the [North Africans].”

Some Indians carried on their own counter-propaganda campaign, using their social standing and influence among the troops to persuade sepoys to remain loyal to the British. The Kommandant at Zossen conceded in early 1916 that Sikh and Gurkha officers remained wholeheartedly loyal to England and that they had the ears of their fellow soldiers. Later that year, the Indian Independence Committee called to the attention of the Foreign Office,

the baneful influence that is being exercised on the prisoners in Wuensdorf by the Sikh Jamadar Suwai Singh and the Gurkha Subedar-Major Sher Singh Rana. From intimate conversations with the prisoners we are able to show not only that these two men are

723 PAAA R21253, ibid.
724 PAAA R21253, report by the commander of the Halbmondlager, January 25, 1916.
doing their best to resist the spread of patriot ideas among the soldiers, but that they are secretly carrying on a strong anti-German and pro-English propaganda.  

Subadar-Major Sher Singh Rana testified after his repatriation in 1918,

I did my best to dissuade Indian soldiers from listening to any advances. In my opinion the sedition propaganda had little effect on them ‘going in at one ear and out at the other.’

In August 1916, camp authorities transferred Rana to Clausthal where he stayed for seven or eight months when all of the Indian prisoners excluding himself and two other Gurkha officers and one Sikh officer were sent to Romania. “We were sent to the punishment camp at Strohen, owing to our refusal to accept German advances.”

When persuasion did not work, other Indian prisoners resorted to intimidation and violence to keep comrades loyal to the British Empire. On January 10, 1916, as the originally scheduled departure date for the Volunteer battalion neared, a serious fight broke out in the camp among the Sikhs in which three men were badly hurt. The Indian Committee investigated and found, “The Sikh Jemadar and certain other officers (who are all very friendly to the English and opposed to the idea of men leaving for Constantinople or the Indian frontier) hold that the fight was the outcome of some foolish and petty jealousies.” But:

About fifteen non-commissioned officers and Mr. Kartaram (whose word cannot be doubted) hold that the fight was brought about by the Sikh Jemadar and his faction to intimidate the patriotic Sikh prisoners, especially Mita Singh, who has been very active in carrying on propaganda among the Sikhs.

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726 TNA FO 383/390, sworn statement of Subadar-Major Sher Singh Rana 1/4th Gurkha Rifles.
727 TNA FO 383/390, ibid.
Undoubtedly the Sikh Jemadar and the four Mohammadan officers have been using their influence (which is not a negligible quantity) to counteract our work and to dissuade men from participating in our patriotic cause. There is also a rumor that some of the officers are spending money to win people to their side and keep them subservient.\footnote{PAAA R21253, Indian Independence Committee to the Foreign Office, January 14, 1916.}

After the first detachment of Indian volunteers departed for Constantinople in April 1916, the Germans gave up recruiting efforts entirely. Camp authorities were skeptical that the remaining 400 to 500 Indian soldiers in the camp could be persuaded to join a battalion.\footnote{PAAA R21253, Foreign Office memo, January 28, 1916.} “As for future propaganda efforts,” read one report, “they are unlikely to win over any more Muslims because the remaining are Punjabis who have little interest in the Holy War.”\footnote{PAAA R21253, report by the commander of the Halbmondlager, January 25, 1916.} Regarding Hindu soldiers with families and homes in British India, “it will be difficult to compel them to join the Legion.” Camp authorities also sensed that the Ottomans had lost all enthusiasm for the project.\footnote{PAAA R21255, Report from Zossen, March 14, 1916.} In June 1916, the camp’s commander expressed his view that propaganda activities geared towards recruiting volunteers should terminate. He doubted that even a few more might join and warned that efforts to recruit volunteers might undermine efforts aimed at fostering sympathetic feelings among the Indian troops for their German hosts.\footnote{PAAA R21258, Nadoly to the Foreign Office, June 12, 1916.} In April 1917, German authorities emptied Zossen of the vast majority of its Indian population and transferred 416 of the soldiers to a new prison camp in Romania. No propaganda took place at this camp, and the soldiers’ daily routine consisted of gardening and farm
work. The Indian Independence Committee learned about this decision after the fact and protested,

We are earnestly of the opinion that a great mistake will be made if the proposal is carried out, especially against the wishes of the prisoners and in view of the many serious objections that ought to be taken into consideration.

Indian prisoners of war held deep within the Reich retained agency and, to a certain extent, the power of choice. Collaboration and resistance presented a host of risks and rewards. Sepoys were never of one mind as to what option provided them the best chance of returning home safely. Some, having forfeited whatever financial solvency the British offered by deserting their posts at the front, agreed to throw in their lot with the Germans and their Ghadar allies. Others, especially those from the Punjab, ignored German appeals because they understood the risk siding with the Reich might pose to themselves and their families living under British rule. Still others carried on a much more active form of resistance, using their influence or resorting to physical violence to keep comrades loyal to the British Empire. Bad health care and the mistreatment sepoys suffered at the hands of racist guard may have done more to keep Indians out of the ranks of the volunteer battalions than anything else. And yet, 44 Indian soldiers did agree to fight for the Germans. Still others joined a risky expedition to Afghanistan, to compel the Emir to invade British India. It is to their story that we now turn.

To the Gates of India

733 TNA FO 383/406, report on visit to the POW camp at Morile Maculesti, Romania, by Snouck Hurgronje, March 4, 1918.
734 PAAA R21261, Indian Independence Committee to the Foreign Office, March 10, 1917.
As stated, a number of the Indian soldiers who collaborated with the Germans tried to return to India and Afghanistan. In this way, imperial subalterns harnessed opportunities created by the world war and imperial rivalry. This section shifts our vantage point and considers perspectives from British India. Newspapers and government officials in India worried considerably about the vulnerability and permeability of the borders on India’s Northwest Frontier, as indeed they had done for decades. British intelligence officers and political agents in the Middle East, Persia, and Afghanistan learned in 1915 that small bands of sepoys - deployed to France, captured by the Germans, and “converted” a Zossen - had switched sides and were making their way across southwest Asia towards the Indian frontier. Some of these men carried weapons and revolutionary propaganda. The British Empire tried to intercept these Indian prisoners of war as part of a broader effort to maintain the British Empire in India. What emerges is the story of a small group of imperial subalterns trying to make their way home across a war torn continent and an Empire desperate to stop them from doing so. It is a story human mobility in an era of empire and world war.

No doubt, the greatest concern of the Indian families who sent sons and husbands to war was the safety of those men. Although sepoys at the front freely exchanged rumors that the Germans treated Indian captives kindly, audiences in India generally received no news at all on the whereabouts and well-being of captured soldiers. Audiences in India worried about the treatment Indian prisoners of war received in Germans. In Lahore, the *Akhbar-i’-Am* wrote in February 1915:
There are also Indian soldiers as prisoners in the hands of the enemy. We wonder what treatment he is meting out to them. Some American commission should pay a visit to these poor people also, though they are not Christians.  

In early 1915, a letter from the Maharaja of Rewa to the Government of India found its way to various government offices in London. “I have read in the papers from time to time with pleasure the arrangements made by the British Government for the Indian soldiers,” he wrote, “but I wish to know, if possible, whether the enemy respects scruples of the Hindus with regard to food. For example a Hindu would rather die than take beef.” The Government of India’s political agent in Baghelkand responded to the Maharaja that no reports had yet been received of any Hindu having been taken prisoner but that enquiries would be made on the question.

Yet for those with their gaze firmly set on the stability of British rule in South Asia, the diet of Indian prisoners paled in comparison to events on the Indian frontier. During the closing months of 1914, when the war in France hung in the balance and Indian sepoys rushed to the front, many believed that Afghanistan held the balance of power in South Asia. While the country was nominally independent, Emir Habibullah Khan in Kabul, in power since 1901, was a patron of the British Empire. He enjoyed a £100,000 allowance and in 1914 owned the only automobile in the entire country, a Rolls-Royce. Although Habibullah declared strict neutrality at the outbreak of the war, it

736 TNA PRO FO 383/39, copy of a demi-official letter no. 4150 dated the 3rd December 1914 from Lt-Col. S.H. Godfrey, C.I.E. Political Agent in Baghelkand, to the Hon’ble Mr. O.V. Bosanquet, C.S.I., C.I.E., Agent to the Governor General in Central India. The India Office in London received this letter in early January 1915 and the Foreign Office seems to have received a copy in February.
was no secret, opined the Punjabi newspaper *Zamindar* in October 1914, that the Emir was a man of ambition.

Afghanistan is a rising and ambitious country. It used to be called the Bulgaria of Asia, but the Amir’s ambition is to see it transformed into the Japan of Central Asia.  

The newspaper also believed that Afghans would be particularly susceptible to pan-Islamic appeals emanating from Constantinople, and worried that Britain could not count on the promises of the Afghan ruler. “The Afghans are a warlike race able to produce from 2,00,000 to 3,00,000 fighting men – a factor which should not be lightly ignored.” The following day, *Zamindar* discussed the “Afghan peril” in greater depth.

It is absurd to suppose … that, if, in the event of England and Russia being forced to unsheathe the sword against Turkey, the Afghans, whose natural sympathies are with Turkey and who possess a large and powerful army, are offered territorial concessions … as the price of their maintenance of neutrality, they will be ready to accept such terms. They will never be ready to see the Turks wiped out of existence on such terms, as it would be tantamount to digging their own graves.

By 1915, newspapers in the Punjab sounded the alarm that the Emir was preparing to sever his ties with the British and that India and Afghanistan stood on the brink of war. “Recent correspondence between His Majesty the Amir of Afghanistan and the Government of India forebodes future trouble between the two countries,” wrote the *Ahl-i-Hadis* (Amritsar) on February 26.

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Afghanistan was made independent to serve as a buffer State between India and Russia. But that necessity is no longer felt, because England and Russia are now friends and the Amir’s personality is of no importance.\textsuperscript{740}

At the same time, British authorities learned about Germany’s efforts to harness the revolutionary potential of pan-Islam in order to “convert” captured Indian – especially Afghan - prisoners of war. In early 1915, the British Consulate General in Rotterdam reported that the Germans were concentrating Muslim prisoners from the British, French, and Russian empires at a camp near Zossen, outside Berlin, and that a special mosque was to be built. The Consulate General wrote to the Foreign Office:

In view of the harsh (to use no stronger term) treatment meted out to prisoners of war in Germany, and especially to Britishers, the above information is rather symptomatic and in my opinion means that the German authorities are trying to start an anti British crusade amongst the native officers and men of the Indian Army now in captivity, and doubtless amongst the native French soldiers as well.\textsuperscript{741}

The British Foreign Office and India Office spent much of the war trying to gather as much intelligence as they could on conditions and activities at Zossen. The hope was that Britain could find ways of keeping Indian POWs loyal to the Empire. On June 17, 1915, representatives of the India Office, Foreign Office, War Office, Indian Soldiers’ Fund and the Prisoners of War Help Committee met informally at the India Office in order to consider various questions in connection with Indian prisoners of war in Germany. At the top of the agenda were questions concerning where the Germans interned Indian prisoners, whether they confined Indian troops with their British officers, if they kept and might provide complete lists of Indian prisoners, whether they allowed

\textsuperscript{740} IOR L/R/5/196, \textit{Ahl-i-Hadis}, February 26, 1915, p. 126.
\textsuperscript{741} TNA FO 383/39, letter from the British Consulate General in Rotterdam to the Foreign Office, 7 January 1915.
Indian prisoners to communicate with their friends, and if the British Government could ask the American Embassy to make a special report on the condition and wants of Indian prisoners. The various representatives present at the June 1915 meeting decided that if such a special report on the Indian prisoners could be obtained, the report could, “if considered desirable, be issued in India with a view to assuring the Indian public that Indian prisoners of war were being properly cared for.”

At the same time, the Indian Soldiers’ Fund (ISF), an organization set up shortly after the outbreak of the war, regularly sent large dispatches of food, clothing and other comforts to Indian prisoners. The ISF also spent the war trying to construct an accurate list of the exact number of Indian prisoners in Germany, their names and whereabouts. They did this primarily by collecting information from four sources: (1) from the Office of the Military Secretary, India Office, (2) from the Deputy Adjutant General, Rouen, (3) from the British Red Cross Society, Prisoners of War Branch, and (4) from private sources. The first three of these received their information, in turn, from the German Red Cross Society. The task of creating an accurate list of Indian prisoners was all the more difficult, the ISF concluded in June 1916, because “there is no system in Zossen, Germany (where nearly all the Indian prisoners are now confined) under which any kind

742 TNA PRO FO 383/65, Minutes of an informal Conference held at the India Office on 17th June 1915 for the purpose of considering various questions in connection with Indian Officers and other ranks prisoners of War in Germany.
743 The American Embassy in Berlin also acted as an important link between the British Empire and Indian prisoners until the Americans broke off diplomatic relations with Germany in 1917. In January 1916, the Calcutta Office of the Y.M.C.A. sent large supplies of curry powder and “similar consignments” to Indian prisoners in Germany through the care of the American embassies in London and Berlin. See TNA, FO 383/151.
744 TNA FO 383/194.
of revision of the name of the prisoners is undertaken.”745 The ISF valued the occasional letter from an internee so long as it contained the names of other Indian prisoners. Two May 3 letters from Subadar Ransur Rana of the 2/8th Gurkha Rifles, a prisoner of war at the Halbmondlager, made its way through the various Government Offices. One of the letters included a list of 29 Indian soldiers who had died of disease, and instructions from the Subadar: “Please do not send any parcels on their names.” The second letter contained 63 names of soldiers belonging to the 2/8th Gurkha rifles “who have never received any parcels.”746 The Germans, for their part, recognized the potentially damaging effect care parcels could have on their own propaganda efforts at the Halbmondlager. “The packages for the English prisoners are not superfluous,” noted the camp Kommandant. “Instead, they are intended to counter the effects of German propaganda.”747 Accordingly, all care parcels passed first through the hands of the camp Kommandant who then distributed goods to the soldiers personally.748

While the British kept tabs on activities at Zossen, Germany began deploying sepoy “converts” to Constantinople and the Middle East in order to spread revolution and jihad. These soldiers carried weapons and propaganda. One leaflet, confiscated by the British in Kerman, Persia, in 1916, offered an appeal from the German Chancellor, Bethmann Hollweg, to an Indian prince.

As the reputation of Your Highness as one of the most enlightened champions in the cause of your country, has also penetrated to us, I venture to direct this address to Your highness, trusting that Your Highness will make every effort to promote the cause of India. As the British World Empire is at present obliged to develop all its forces to meet

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745 TNA FO 383/194.
746 TNA FO 383/194.
747 PAAA R21253, findings of inspection of Zossen, January 19, 1916.
748 PAAA R21258, German Political Section to the Ministry of War, July 30, 1916.
the dangers which threaten it in Europe, Asia and Africa, and as the final liberation of Egypt and Persia from the English and Russian yoke is imminent. I am convinced that Your Highness will do all that is possible to serve also India, and to procure it the position of an independent Empire, in the Council of Nations which is due to it.⁷⁴⁹

The most ambitious of Germany’s missions was an ill-fated expedition sent from Berlin to Afghanistan to purchase the friendship of the Emir. At the Foreign Office, Oppenheim recruited the talents of a young and daring orientalist, Lieutenant Oskar Ritter von Niedermayer. The Lieutenant had only just returned to Europe in time for the war after spending two years abroad on a grant from the German military, traveling across the Middle East, Persia, Afghanistan and India. In 1914, he received his orders to lead a small team from Berlin to Kabul where he would compel the Emir to abandon neutrality, side with the Central Powers, and invade India’s Northwest Frontier. The expedition traveled by rail to Constantinople, from there to Baghdad, and then Isfahan in Persia. Along the way, some of the deserters of the 58th Rifles, among them Jemadar Mir Mast, joined the expedition. After a number of fits and starts, Niedermayer’s team reached the Persia-Afghanistan border in the summer of 1915 and began a mad dash for the palace of the Emir.⁷⁵⁰

British intelligence officers and the Government of India did their best to intercept and neutralize Niedermayer’s team. On August 23, 1915, Lord Hardinge wrote to a political agent in Khyber, instructing him to notify the Emir that a German expedition had entered Afghan territory.

⁷⁴⁹ IOR L/PS/13/144, pamphlet left behind by Germans at Kerman in 1916.
It is reported by the British Consul at Sistan by telegraph that one such party [of Germans], to the number of about 70 persons, which includes six Germans, traveling swiftly, has passed Your Majesty’s western frontier at Chah Rig and has effected an entry into Afghanistan.\(^{751}\)

The Emir promised that the German agents would be disarmed and apprehended. This did not happen. Instead, when Niedermayer reached Kabul, the Emir stalled and left the expedition waiting for more than a month before granting an audience. The British, meanwhile, increased the Emir’s annual stipend by £25,000. Niedermayer’s expedition stalled out and Afghanistan remained neutral. Mir Mast, evidently, returned home safely.\(^{752}\)

But the British remained on the alert: Indian prisoners of war - sometimes accompanying German expeditions, sometimes not – were accepting money and weapons and crossing the war torn Middle East, bound for the Indian frontier. In mid-1917, British agents captured a number of Germans, Austrians, Turks and 11 Afghan sepoys during a surprise raid in Shiraz, Persia. Nine of the soldiers belonged to the 58th Rifles, all of them men who deserted on March 2-3, 1915. Two other soldiers belonged to the 20th Punjabis. Most of the men hailed from the same region and tribe in Afghanistan and were Kambar Khel Afridis. The soldiers told British agents that they had been captured by the Germans, but the British did not believe the story. The men carried identical purses and each had £100 in his possession. A Civil Intelligence Officer in Karachi wrote on July 23, 1917:

It is an established fact, I understand, that the deserters of the 58th Rifles were employed as secret agents of the enemy when arrested. The possession of purses of the same pattern

\(^{751}\) IOR L/PS/10/473, Lord Hardinge to political agent, August 23, 1915.  
\(^{752}\) See Introduction to Das, Race, Empire and First World War Writing.
and newness of these deserters ... makes it appear either that all purchased them after being made prisoners or that all were equipped and commissioned as secret agents by the same authority. 753

Instead of going home, the captured sepoys spent the rest of the war in a prison in Karachi.

As Indian soldiers departed from Zossen for the Indian frontier, the British Empire tried to disrupt Germany’s plans for revolution in two ways. First, organizations like the Indian Soldiers Fund sent care parcels to the troops interned at Zossen in an effort to keep the men loyal to the British Empire. Second, British agents in India and the Middle East worked to intercept those sepoys who had already joined German expeditions. Some soldiers, like Mir Mast, successfully navigated the volatile landscape of the Middle East and returned home. Others were not so lucky. After spending the earlier part of the war in a German prison in Berlin, they spent the remainder of the war in an Indian prison in Karachi.

Conclusion

The First World War was a clash of empires. As this chapter has demonstrated, sepoys captured thousands of miles from home played a central role in Germany’s plans to topple the British Empire in India. At prisoner of war camps scattered throughout the Reich, Indian prisoners received special treatment in order to win them over to the Central Powers. At Zossen, the Germans and their Ghadar allies carried on an aggressive propaganda campaign. They offered sepoys the chance to volunteer in an Indian battalion

753 IOR L/PS/11/129, 4700, Civil Intelligence Officer, Karachi, July 23, 1917.
and fight for the Turks in the Middle East. Yet collaborating and resisting were both fraught with risk. Some sepoys volunteered for the Indian battalion, or an ill-fated expedition to Kabul. Others stubbornly resisted, resorting to persuasion and even violence to keep their comrades loyal to the British Empire. These men lost the special status the German Reich afforded them and spent the later years of the war in punishment camps. In all likelihood, most of the sepoys sent to the Middle East by the Germans did not want to fight another war on another front. Instead, they wanted to return home. The British, concerned for the security of India’s volatile Northwest Frontier, stymied the Afghanistan expedition of Oskar Niedermayer. Meanwhile, political agents stationed in Persia intercepted small bands of Indian deserters, insuring that the men did not reach home on their own terms, but on the terms of the British Empire. Indeed, the following chapter demonstrates that the British considered the repatriation of all Indian sepoys in Europe – even those that remained loyal – a politically fraught endeavor.
Chapter Five
Homecoming

On October 31, 1915 the Indian Corps received notice that it would leave France for good. No less desperate for bodies to fight against an enemy deeply entrenched on French soil, the British Empire chose to withdraw the very troops who, just a year earlier, arrived in Marseilles to shouts of “Vive les Hindoos!” At the start of October, the India Corps held a stretch of frontline trenches running 10,825 yards, but its units were skeletons of what they had been when they first stepped into the trenches a year prior. On November 4, relief of the Lahore and Meerut Divisions by the 11th Corps began. Two days later, the Meerut Division left the trenches for the last time. Sir John French directed the highest of praise to the departing soldiers in his November 22 order of the day:

On the departure of the Indian Corps from my command, under which you have fought for more than a year, I wish to send a message of thanks to all officers, non-commissioned officers and men for the work you have done for the Empire. … You have done your work here well, and are now being sent to another place where an unscrupulous enemy has stirred up strife against the King-Emperor.754

One day after Christmas 1915, the last transport conveying troops of the Indian Corps left Marseilles.

The decision to withdraw Indian soldiers from Europe and repatriate sepoys to India was fraught with imperial concerns. British authorities made the decision to withdraw the Indian Corps from Europe because they worried about two things: the

754 Quoted in Merewether and Smith, Indian Corps, 462.
continued military efficiency of the depleted Indian infantry, and the stability of the Empire’s racial hierarchies. One aspect of the story almost entirely overlooked by historians concerns the repatriation of some 500 former Indian prisoners of war from 1918 to 1919. In this endeavor, imperial concerns – namely, the continued political stability of the British Raj – were paramount. Aware that the British did not place the welfare of the sepoys at the forefront and of the geopolitical situation more broadly, some Indian prisoners of war used their contacts in Germany to secure advantage for themselves at the close of the war. What emerges is a story of British military authorities trying to restore the kinds of controls and leverage they had over Indian soldiers prior to war, and of sepoys resisting those efforts to one degree or another.

**Bound for Canaan**

No less desperate for bodies in the trenches of France and Belgium, British military authorities chose to withdraw Indian infantry from the frontlines at the end of 1915. This decision was fraught with imperial concerns, just as the decision in 1914 to deploy Indian soldiers to Europe for the first time had been. On one level, the decision to withdraw Indian infantrymen tacitly acknowledged the failure of British military strategy. British generals failed to produce a breakthrough and the Empire’s strict adherence to martial race doctrine made it impossible for recruiters to refill the depleted ranks of the Indian Corps. Yet a confluence of imperial concerns also informed the decision to withdraw Indian sepoys from Europe. Orientalist tropes contributed to a growing consensus among British policy makers that Indian men would be unable to endure another harsh European winter. At the same time, the staggering loss of life suffered by British officers in Indian
units left many worrying about the preservation of the Empire’s racial hierarchies, which dictated that brown sepoys follow the orders of white officers. Determined to continue utilizing the sepoys to further the wartime agenda of the British Empire, military authorities did not consent to sending the exhausted Indian sepoys home. Instead, the soldiers redeployed to the Middle East where British commanders, long practiced in thinking about racial difference, believed conditions were better suited to the needs and limits of Indian men.

The decision to withdraw the Indian Corps from France was in large part an acknowledgment on the part of commanders of the grisly effects of the industrial warfare to which they subjected soldiers. After the Battle of Loos, it was clear to all observers that the Lahore and Meerut divisions no longer constituted an effective fighting force. The 59th Rifles, which arrived in France in 1914 at strength with 13 British officers, 18 Indian officers, and 810 other ranks, began October 1915 with no British officers and only 4 Indian officers, supplemented by 75 men. The 47th Sikhs had no British or Indian officers and only 28 men remaining from its original contingent. The Corps had to take in additional British units because Indian troops were too few and far between. By mid-1915, the Corps was Indian in name only. At the start of June, the Meerut and Lahore divisions counted 36,420 British riflemen and only 11,230 Indian riflemen. Walter Lawrence wrote,

> The Sepoys have been accustomed to look upon their regiment as a family: they have lost the officers whom they knew, and the regiment, which formerly was made up of well-

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756 Ibid, 377.
defined and exclusive castes and tribes, is now composed of miscellaneous and dissimilar elements. I saw when I visited General Willcocks's headquarters some figures on this subject. The 15th Sikhs is now composed of men taken from nine different units. This is no longer a regiment; it has no cohesion. In many Battalions the British officers have been twice obliterated. So that when a wounded Sepoy is asked whether he wishes to go back to his regiment, he knows that it is a regiment commanded by officers whom he does not know and composed of men with whom he has no caste or tribal affinity.757

With the imminent arrival of Kitchener’s New Army at long last, thinking at the top was that the Indian Corps had become obsolete.758

The problem was that recruiters in India had failed to keep up with the demand for bodies in France. When the Corps landed in France, it had a reserve of 10% to fill gaps in the ranks. At the start of January 1915, fully one-sixth of all the reservists deployed to France had been found unfit for active duty.759 Thereafter, the Indian Corps relied on replacements detached from other regiments stationed in India. But even this system proved to be only a short-lived stopgap. Walter Lawrence called attention to the problem in March 1915. “As regards the sepoys, I noticed boys who have had no musketry training, elderly men who could not stand winter at the front. I have seen men returned from the front, and men who have come as reinforcements from India who will never now be of any fighting value.”760 In effect, the British were victims of the very martial race doctrine they had carefully crafted in the preceding decades. By segregating regiments and companies along ethnic and class lines, the British severely handicapped their ability to maintain the military effectiveness of units deployed to trenches in France.

757 TNA WO 32/5110, Lawrence to Kitchener, June 15, 1915.
758 Jack, “The Indian Army on the Western Front,” 350.
759 Merewether and Smith, Indian Corps, 455.
760 TNA WO32/5110, Lawrence to Kitchener, March 3, 1915.
But a host of orientalist tropes and racial anxieties also informed the decision to withdraw the Indian Corps from France. Among these was the widespread notion that men from tropical climates could not acclimate to colder climates. Like all soldiers that fought on the Western Front – French, German and English – Indian soldiers griped and complained about the bitter cold of the Northern European winter, and the rains of spring and autumn.\footnote{This point is aptly made in the case of French troops in Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, \textit{Men at War 1914-1918: National Sentiment and Trench Journalism in France during the First World War} (Providence: Berg, 1992).} The difference was, when Indians complained, their commanders took it as an indication of racial and cultural inferiority, as proof that brown men from South Asia were entirely out of place in the European climate. The idea that Indians somehow suffered more from the cold than other soldiers is preposterous. When provided adequate winter clothing, they proved no better and no worse than anybody else. A cavalry soldier stationed in France wrote to Risalpur, India, in January 1917:

> Nowadays there is intense cold owing to the prolonged frost. But it does not do much harm, and we Indians keep very well this weather, although we are quite unaccustomed to such cold. Government has made such excellent arrangements for food and clothing that every soldier is able to face the cold with complacency.\footnote{TNA FO 383/288, from cavalry soldier to Risalpur, India, January 26, 1917.}

Nevertheless, British commanders and policymakers believed in 1915 that the morale of the sepoys could not endure another winter in Europe.\footnote{Omissi, \textit{Indian Voices}, 3.} In so doing, they permitted racial prejudice and orientalist stereotypes to inform frontline policy. A July 28 memo from the India Office to the War Office concluded:

> Mr. Chamberlain ... thinks that before the approach of winter the War Office and General Headquarters should carefully consider the desirability of removing the Indian elements of the Corps from France and of transferring them to the more congenial climate.
of Egypt or Cyprus, where they would have ample opportunity of recuperating their health and spirit and of being reorganized as effective units, while at the same time they would be centrally situated for the defense of our interests in Egypt and the near East.\textsuperscript{764}

The British also worried that the more they continued to ask of the sepoys - the longer the Indian Corps remained in Europe - the greater the risk of rebellion. The matter of when the Indian Corps would leave Europe was already a topic of conversation by early 1915. With their eyes ever fixed on the Empire’s past – specifically, 1857 - some officers associated with the Corps worried that the precipitous drop in soldier morale of winter of 1914-15 increased the likelihood of another mutiny. Based on the 200 some-odd letters he and his team read daily from Indians wounded in hospital, E.B. Howell in the Censor’s Office advised in January:

[I]f the strain is not to reach breaking point the ‘door of hope’ must be opened somewhere before long. To remove the whole contingent from France would be an heroic measure which, while it would be hailed with relief by many of the rank and file, and by all their relatives, would at the same time probably arouse opposition on military grounds and from military officers concerned.\textsuperscript{765}

At the same time, Howell cautioned against withdrawing the Indian sepoys from Europe too soon. The troops and Indian nationalists back home might infer that the British were trying to put the brakes on a growing push for racial equality, reverting to the much criticized “white man’s war” policy of the South African War. He warned, “It would also be liable to misconstruction in India where a large body of public opinion is still as keen as ever on the demonstration of the theorem which the Indian contingent set

\textsuperscript{764} IOR L/MIL/7/17517, India Office to War Office, July 28, 1915.
\textsuperscript{765} IOR L/MIL/17347, Note by the Censor, dated January 23, 1915.
out to prove.” Imperially minded decision makers believed that they had to walk a fine line. At some point, they would have to remove the troops from the lines to prevent them from reaching “the breaking point.” Yet they could not remove the troops too soon because of the political repercussions it might have in India where the vernacular press and political elite were still cheering the decision to let Indian troops prove their mettle against a white enemy.

After several months of exposure to the routines and horrors of industrial slaughter, many sepoys longed to return home. By early 1915, noted E.B. Howell, Indians had taken to sending letters of congratulations to those who had been invalided home to India. They did do, he added for emphasis, “in a very very large number of letters.” Soldiers belonging to the 2/9 Gurkhas at the front wrote to Ram Govind on March 20, 1915: “About the state of affairs here I tell you that both sides are using machine guns & cannon. Rifles are not much used. Consider yourself lucky that you have returned to India.” The letters of some other soldiers reveal that the traumas endured by men at the front eroded any hope for survival. An Indian officer of the 15th Sikhs wounded in Brighton wrote to a Subedar in mid March:

I am delighted to hear that you are going to India. Do not wait one minute but go at once.

On the 10th, 11th, and 12th March there was a great battle. The Native Army worked valiantly and took two miles of the enemy’s line. The enemy suffered severely but our native Army’s losses were beyond measure. It is finished – vanished.

Events in March 1915 suddenly offered sepoys some hope that they might return home alive. Kitchener’s New Army was preparing for deployment to France, promising

766 IOR L/MIL/17347, Note by the Censor, dated January 23, 1915.
767 IOR L/MIL/5/825/2, from the Censors’ Report, March 27, 1915.
768 IOR L/MIL/5/825/2, from an Indian officer in the 15th Sikhs to a Subedar, March 17, 1915.
relief for the battered and depleted Indian regiments. One Sepoy wrote to a family member in India in late March 1915, “A great English Army is now on the way here. It is called Kitchener’s Army and is about 30 lakhs (3 million) strong. There will be great fighting. We hope that in that fighting we people shall be at rest.”

Seemingly in response to an “apparent absence of any hope of return to India” found in soldier letters, General Willcocks announced that the soldiers would return to India in the near future. Rumors of this message shot through the regiments. Ali Baz Khan of the 129th Baluchis wrote home to his uncle in March 1915 after Neuve Chappelle, “We have taken 1000 German prisoners & I hope that God will soon make an end. We are to return to our own country.”

Raja Khan of the 59th Rifles wrote from hospital in England to Havildar Diwan Ali Khan still serving with the regiment in France on March 21, “What order was it that the General gave that the Lahore & Meerut Divisions were to return home.”

A wounded Sikh in hospital wrote on March 25 to a friend at the front, “What is the truth of the report of our going back to India? What reason has so great a man as Wilcox Sahib to say what is not true?”

Soldiers at the front told friends and family members back home about the promise. Musaffar Khan, a Punjabi Muslim serving with the 125th in France wrote to his brother, “Do not be anxious. If God grants us life for the next two months, we shall return

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769 IOR L/MIL/5/825/2, from a sepoy at the front, March 22, 1915.
770 IOR L/MIL/5/825/2, from a soldier in the 129th Baluchis to his uncle, March 1915.
771 IOR L/MIL/5/825/2, from a sepoy in the 59th Rifles to a sepoy with the regiment, March 21, 1915.
772 IOR L/MIL/5/825/2, from a Sikh in hospital, March 25, 1915.
to our own country." A sepoy in the 47th Sikhs wrote to a friend in the Punjab on March 13,

On the 9th March the ‘Lord Sahib’ who commands the Indian Armies came & announced that as the Lahore & Meerut Divisions had both done good work & had suffered heavily, & as the new army had been completed & had arrived from England, our King-Emperor, God bless him, had sanctioned the return of these two divisions to India, where they would arrive in about two months’ time.

Another sepoy serving with the 30th Lancers in France mistakenly assumed that General Willcocks’ announcement applied to the cavalry as well. In the words of the Censor, he “distorted it in the same way as the infantry.” The sepoy wrote, “Now only a few days remain & we shall all soon be returning to our own country.” British authorities conceded that the soldiers beat imperial propaganda to the punch. In England, Walter Lawrence wrote. “I have heard from many Indians and from British officers that regiments were distinctly told before Neuve Chapelle that they would be sent back home in May. It is a dangerous thing to make promises to Indians and not fulfill them.” The continued reign of the Empire in India depended upon the British military honoring its promise to the troops.

Another concern was that stalemate on the Western Front undermined British prestige. Despite repeated assaults, British commanders proved unable to deliver significant gains, much less a breakthrough. Casulties mounted, and sepoys began to

773 IOR L/MIL/5/825/2, from a Punjabi Muslim serving in the 125th to his brother, March 21, 1915.
774 IOR L/MIL/5/825/1, from a sepoy in the 47th Sikhs to a friend in the Punjab, March 13, 1915.
775 IOR L/MIL/5/825/2, from a sepoy in the 30th Lancers to a friend in India, March 21, 1915.
776 TNA WO 32/5110, Lawrence to Kitchener, June 15, 1915.
notice the extent to which the British had been materially unprepared for the demands of
total war. A wounded Dogra wrote from the Brighton Pavilion, “The Germans are
immensely strong, and the English are much terrified, believing that their Government
will not last. Their munitions of war are all spent, and they are beginning to quarrel
amongst themselves.” 777 Another letter written by a ward orderly at the Kitchener
Hospital in Brighton caught the eye of the censors. He wrote, “Do not be anxious about
us, for we are soon returning to India. That is by next July. In England we get nothing at
all to eat. The wives of the European soldiers who have been killed in battle are
wandering about starving, and the war is still going on.” 778 The longer Indians served in
Europe, the more difficult it would be for the British to keep imperial subjects in awe of
their imperial masters.

Running alongside this concern, British authorities worried that the high
casualties suffered by white officers undermined the Empire’s bargaining and coercive
leverage with sepoys. In keeping with Kipling-notions of the “white man’s burden,” or
France’s *mission civilisatrice*, white British officers played a critical role in maintaining
imperial hierarchies and ideologies: it was patriarchy guided by – and no less meant to
reinforce – racism. Secretary Chamberlain in the India Office bemoaned in mid-1915,
“the British officers, who are and must always be the foundation as well as the
mainspring of regimental efficiency in Indian units, have unhappily through heavy
casualties lost much of their influence and value.” The present officers were mostly
inexperienced and unknown to the men and so failed to command the confidence and

777 IOR, L MIL/5/828/1, wounded Dogra to Punjab, July 17, 1915.
devotion of the Indians. For all that newspapers had been inundated with the exploits of India’s martial races, popular and expert perception held that the sepoy was lost without the guidance of his white, father-like, British officer. Walter Lawrence wrote of Indian soldiers, “In some ways they are children, but intensely proud, shrewd, and sensitive.” Merewether and Smith wrote,

Among the [Indian] soldiers, and even among the Indian officers, the degree of dependence upon the officer is on the whole greater than is known, or perhaps has ever been known, in any army in the world. And side by side with that dependence, there has grown up on the part of the British officer, however young he may be, the habit and frame of mind of a father, and sometimes, when the occasion requires it, even more the habit and frame of mind of a mother. … If he is the right sort of officer (and they nearly all are), his men bestow upon him, almost from the day he is gazette, a degree of respect and a depth of loyalty which brings responsibility to the most volatile and maturity to the most boyish. … and the Indian soldier yields the same unquestioning obedience to a trusted officer which a boy who has a profound affection and admiration for his father gives to the admonitions of his father.

British authorities may very well have been more concerned with the losses suffered by the British officers commanding Indian troops than with the tragic losses suffered by the sepoys. The British Empire, so they thought, depended upon a plentiful supply of paternalistic white men to competently command the obedience of Indian men.

When the Indian infantry withdrew from the Western Front in November 1915, they received a special order of the day from Field-Marshal French, who said: “The Indian Corps have … shown most praiseworthy courage under novel and trying

779 IOR L/MIL/7/17517, India Office to War Office, July 28, 1915.
780 TNA WO, 32/5110, Arrangements made for Indian sick and wounded in England and France, March 1916.
781 Merewether and Smith, Indian Corps, 471-473.
conditions, both of climate and of fighting.”

A combination of factors – both military- and imperial – fueled the decision to withdraw Indian sepoys from Europe after nearly 14 months of combat. British commanders had failed to produce a decisive victory. In the process, they had squandered the lives of many thousands of Indian soldiers, lives that recruiters in India could not replace so long as they adhered to rigid martial race doctrines and recruiting guidelines. Policy makers deployed the sepoys to Europe in order to save the Empire. Removing Indian soldiers from Europe could serve the same benefit. The British worried that prolonged exposure to the demands of the Western Front undermined white prestige and paternalism, the bedrock of the officer-sepoy relationship and British rule.

The Prisoner Dilemma

With the transfer of the last divisions of Indian cavalry in France to Palestine in early 1918, one might say that the story of Indian soldiers in Europe had come to its definite conclusion. Only it had not. Several hundred Indian prisoners still awaited the end of the war in prison camps scattered throughout the German Reich. As the British Empire began the process of repatriating former prisoners of war, imperial concerns – namely, the continued political stability of the Raj – were paramount. German wartime policy informed the treatment former Indian prisoners of war received at the hands of the British at the end of the war. The British knew that many Indian sepoys enjoyed special treatment during their years in captivity. The challenge, from the perspective of the British, was to determine which sepoys had remained loyal to the British Empire and

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which had switched their political allegiance to the Germans. “Disloyal” prisoners of war would not be allowed to return to the politically volatile landscape of South Asia. Indian soldiers, far from being mere pawns in Britain’s imperial schemes, saw clearly what was at stake at the end of the war. Some willingly collaborated with the British. Others, to avoid the confines of a British or Indian jail, secured their own transportation home or chose to remain in Berlin after the war.

At the time of the November 11, 1918 armistice, millions of human beings remained in captivity on either side of no-man’s-land. The process of repatriating prisoners of war began in earnest. During the nineteenth century, the common practice of prisoner exchange died out. The American Civil War, in fact, was the last conflict in which prisoners were exchanged on a large scale, a practice federal authorities discarded towards the end of the war based on the notion that the trade was unequal. Along the dormant Eastern Front, hundreds of thousands of Russian prisoners had already begun the long trek home in March 1918 with the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. A not altogether dissimilar process developed in Western Europe after the armistice. At the conclusion of hostilities, German records counted approximately 937,000 non-Russian prisoners in German custody. Many prison guards simply opened the gates of the prison camps, leaving Allied prisoners to find their own way by foot back to France along German roads and rail lines. In other cases, Germany’s interim government managed to work in conjunction with the Allies, putting large numbers of prisoners on trains and delivering them to designated collection depots. By the start of 1919, the German

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government had repatriated 576,000 prisoners. The repatriation of Allied prisoners was complete by February 1.  

As a steady trickle of Indian prisoners of war began arriving in England in late 1918, relief organizations rushed to provide the repatriated sepoys various comforts and amenities. “It is a matter of real importance that Indian prisoners of war should not return to their own country with any ground for regarding themselves as neglected by this Department,” read an October 31 letter from the India Office to a Member of Parliament. Yet more than just humanitarianism motivated the efforts of groups like the Indian Soldiers’ Fund. Unless the representatives of the British Empire offered the men treatment comparable to what they had received in Germany, the British risked losing the goodwill of repatriated sepoys. In late October 1918, 45 former Indian prisoners of war arrived in England by way of the Netherlands. All of the men suffered from tuberculosis, and the Indian Soldiers’ Fund, eager to supply the men with food and care parcels, wrote to express its dissatisfaction with the India Office for failing to give the Fund some advance warning.

These men have been in captivity for several years, and from a political point of view it seems to us that proper arrangements should be made to meet them and look after them when they come to England, and we venture to think that the India Office would be only too glad to do this and to see that the men are properly looked after. It may make a very bad impression in India when these men get back if they do not carry away with them a

784 Ibid, 176.
785 IOR L/MIL/7/18502, letter from India Office to J.I. Macpherson, M.P., October 31, 1918.
good impression of the way in which they have been treated in England, and we are sure that the India Office would not wish this.\footnote{IOR L/MIL/7/18502, letter from the Indian Soldiers’ Fund to the India Office, October 28, 1918.}

Indeed, from the very first months of the war, British authorities considered the eventual repatriation of Indian prisoners of war a politically sensitive matter. They questioned the loyalty of prisoners of war that received special treatment behind German lines and suspected that some sepoys, upon their release, might become revolutionary catalysts. A May 7, 1915 telegram from the Government of India to the Foreign Office read:

Reliable information has been received by Criminal Intelligence Department that German newspaper invited some Indians in Europe to go to Germany where they will be well paid for talking to captured Indian soldiers. Those prisoners most amenable to the talk will be the first selected for exchange if and when exchange of prisoners with England begins. Germans intend that after exchange these men should do their best to persuade other soldiers to revolt against the British. It is known for a fact that some Indians are employed by German Government. In the event of exchange becoming practical question or of Indian prisoners being permitted to escape, mental attitude of such Indians will require consideration.\footnote{TNA FO 383/62, telegram from the Government of India to the Foreign Office, 7 May 1915.}

Concern for the “mental attitude” of Indian prisoners of war only intensified as the war dragged on. In August 1916, the Secretary of State for India, Austen Chamberlain, estimated that there were about 700 Indian soldiers in German hands. The Secretary warned that these soldiers, in addition to those interned in Turkey, had been
exposed to “strongly hostile influences.”\footnote{IOR L/MIL/7/18501, Secret memo from Austen Chamberlain to the Governor General of India, 11 August 1916.} If the British did not safeguard against the influence of these men after the war, the soldiers might contribute to growing unrest in India.

There would seem to be a risk that some of these men when they return to their homes may become the willing tools of extremist and anarchist factions in India; and the possible influence in Nepal of men whose minds may have been poisoned against the British connection will not be overlooked.\footnote{Ibid.}

Evidence fed to the British by the Dutch Consulate in late 1917 revealed that Germany continued to court the favor of several dozen interned Indian soldiers well into the final year of the war. Dr. Römer at the Netherlands Legation in Berlin visited the prisoner of war camp at Göttingen in December 1917 and reported to the British Legation at The Hague that Indian prisoners at the camp enjoyed certain privileges not enjoyed by other prisoners. They were allowed to communicate freely with a certain Professor Andreas, a philologist at Göttingen University studying eastern languages. The soldiers visited him daily without guards. The sepoys also enjoyed wide berth to perform their religious rites and had a room in their barracks specially furnished with curtains for greater privacy.

Upon reading this report, the Prisoners of War Department wrote to the India Office on January 10, 1918:

From the information contained in the enclosed note and previous information regarding the preferential treatment afforded to British Indians in Germany, it is evident that these persons are intended to be used by the German Government for political purposes, and that their activities will have to be carefully watched on their release from Germany.\footnote{IOR L/MIL/7/18480.}
Guided by a deep seated concern for the political stability of the British Empire in India, the India Office devised a policy in late 1918 for handling repatriated Indian soldiers. All Indian prisoners of war released on the Western Front congregated at Marseilles. Those released by way of ports on the North Sea (such as from Holland) passed first through London before rejoining their compatriots in southern France. At both sites, the British sifted the soldiers into four categories: (a) genuine prisoners of war; (b) declared deserters to the enemy; (c) those amongst (a) who were known to have taken up arms against the British or to have accepted service with the enemy; and (d) those amongst (a) who were believed to have been armed and equipped by propaganda and required watching in India. Protocol stipulated the following: for (a) and (d), repatriation to India where on arrival special arrangements would be made for (d); for (b), returned to unit for trial or to India in custody to await trial on return of unit from overseas, or dispatched to unit overseas if more convenient and evidence unobtainable in India; and (c) returned to India in custody pending collection of evidence against them. In effect, the British plan assumed that every Indian soldier belonged in one of two groups: loyal, or disloyal. While the India Office expedited loyal soldiers’ return home, military authorities and the Government of India placed every obstacle in the way of disloyal soldiers.

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791 The India Office had been content to table the matter earlier in the war, acknowledging that the method of dealing with prisoners would depend to a great extent on the conditions under which peace was declared. See: IOR/L/MIL/7/18501, secret dispatch from the Government of India to Sir Austen Chamberlain, March 16, 1917.

792 IOR L/MIL/7/18501, Paraphrase of a cipher telegram from War Section, A.H.Q., Simla, India to the D.A.G., 3rd Echelon, G.H.Q., Indian Section, Rouen, France, November 15, 1918.
Indian soldiers played a prominent role in helping the British determine who, among the internees, would enjoy expedited return home and who would serve additional time in prison after the war. Some Indian prisoners of war had collaborated with the British during their time in Germany, smuggling information out of the prison camps through various channels. While an internee at Zossen in 1916, Subedar-Major Mala Khan compiled a list of 35 Indian prisoners of war from the 129th Baluchis, the 127th Baluchis, and the 58th Rifles who had “gone over to the enemy.” His list also included the names of Indians who were working for the Germans in the camps, trying to spread sedition. He managed to sneak this list out of the camp to British authorities by hiding it in the clothes of a sick Indian that German authorities had agreed to repatriate to England.  

Other sepoys, repatriated to England prior to the end of the war, collaborated with British authorities from the comfort of hospital beds. On October 21, 1918, a small group of Indian soldiers, many of them sick from an outbreak of tuberculosis at the prison camp in Romania, arrived in England by way of the Netherlands. Jemadar Id Mahomed of the 129th Baluchis testified that during his time in prison, he and Subadar-Major Mala Khan worked to keep the men of the 129th Baluchis loyal. But some Indians went over to the Germans.

I saw once or twice, Suba Khan … I knew Naik Abdul Kadir (Sappers and Miners), Nur Gul, Sar Mast, and Baidulla of my regiment, also Hassan Mir and Abdul Baqui (Punjabis) all these men are employed by the Germans – they receive, I believe, at least seven marks a day each man.

793 IOR L/MIL/7/18501, Statements of repatriated Indian Prisoners of War, December 16, 1918.
794 IOR L/MIL/7/18501, Statement of Jemadar Id Mahomed, December 16, 1918.
At the camp in Romania, he added, other Indian soldiers employed by the Germans, “ill-treated Indian prisoners, steal their parcels, and sell the contents for their own benefit. … They tear up the letters of prisoners with whom they are displeased.” Naik Haidar Khan of the 59th Rifles, also repatriated to England in October 1918, called special attention to the behavior of two Indian prisoners of war.

I have known [Saif Ali, Havilar, 129th Baluchis] for the last four years in Germany. He habitually sells the prisoners (Indian) parcels, and either gives them or sells them to the Germans. I also know Ram Newaz, Havildar, 9th Bhopals – he does exactly the same as Saif Ali and is equally guilty. I believe that certain prisoners (Indians) died because their parcels were sold by these two men.\(^{795}\)

By drawing on the testimony of repatriated Indians and lists smuggled out of Zossen, the British finalized in October 1918 a master list of 92 Indian prisoners of war who had deserted to the enemy or given information or assistance to the enemy after their capture in France.\(^{796}\) Assuming the British had their way, the end of the war would not mean the end of captivity for these soldiers.

But after the war, things did not play out as the British had designed: not, at least, on the terms they dictated. Many of the Indian prisoners of war wanted by the British successfully evaded recapture simply by remaining in Berlin or Constantinople after the war. In April 1916, Naik Hardas Singh secured the assurances of the Kommandant at Zossen that German authorities would not hand him over to the English at the end of the war.\(^{797}\) A number of other Indian soldiers put in requests through the Indian

\(^{795}\) IOR L/MIL/7/18501, statement of Naik Haidar Khan.

\(^{796}\) IOR L/MIL/17/5/2403, Nominal Roll of Indian Prisoners of War, Suspected of having deserted to the enemy or of having given information to or otherwise assisted the enemy after capture (Revised to 24 October 1918), Indian Expeditionary Force “A”.

\(^{797}\) PAAA R21255, report on the Halbmondlager, April 14, 1916.
Independence Committee to begin the naturalization process so that they could legally stay in Germany after the war.\textsuperscript{798} Guli Jan, one of the deserters of the 58\textsuperscript{th} Rifles and a Volunteer, returned to Zossen sometime in 1918 with nine other Afridis. He could not return to England, he told members of the Indian Independence Committee, but staying in Berlin was also frightening because he could not speak the language.\textsuperscript{799} On November 11, 1918, he wrote to Dr. Graetsch at the Intelligence Office for the East:

\begin{quote}
I am very sorry that I did not see you for one week. Please come & see me soon. You know that I have no father no mother and none to help me. I am in great need of help and I can do nothing without you. For one week I could not sleep properly nor take my meals. But my dear you know everything, I cannot write all what I wish to say.\textsuperscript{800}
\end{quote}

Dr. Graetsch did help Guli Jan and the nine other Afridis, drawing on a fund to cover the initial expenses required to find housing and work.\textsuperscript{801} A small community of former Indian POWs settled in Berlin neighborhood of Charlottenburg, amidst the chaos of the German Revolution.

Two years later, some of these men tried to secure amnesty from the British government. In June 1920, Mir Baz Khan and Mir Zamir, deserters from the Indian Army, walked into the offices of the British Passport Control Officer in Berlin where they applied for papers to proceed to India. The Passport Control Officer offered the men tickets to travel to Allied-occupied Cologne to report to the Army authorities, but they refused to leave unoccupied Germany until granted a written pardon. The Passport Officer was not sure what to do and wrote to the India Office, asking for some guidance. “May I be informed whether any special pardon is granted to Indian soldiers who

\textsuperscript{798} PAAA R21262, undated letter from Graetsch. \\
\textsuperscript{799} PAAA R21262, Graetsch to the Foreign Office, November 1918. \\
\textsuperscript{800} PAAA R21262, letter from Guli Jan to Dr. Graetsch, November 11, 1918. \\
\textsuperscript{801} PAAA R21262, letter from Graetsch to (Foreign Office?), December 11, 1918.
deserted on religious grounds, and if so whether I should be authorized to give them a written guarantee that they would not be Court Martialed.” The Officer continued: “It is thought that under proper treatment they might be of use to Indian Intelligence, but in the hands of unscrupulous people in Berlin they might become a possible danger to the Empire.”

The Passport Control Officer included the soldiers’ letters.

Berlin 15 May 1920

Sir

We have the honour to beg you that we are Afghan Afridis of Khyber. We were since a long time in British India Army 57th Regiment. At the beginning of the Great War we were sent with other Indian troops to West Front France to fight against Germany. We were engaged for about 2 years in the West Front & fought faithfully for our King Emperor against the enemy, but unfortunately again we were sent to Egypt to fight against our Religious fellows, the Turks, & our Khalifa. It was impossible according to our religion to fight against our religion. Our religion forbids us to fight against a Muslim. In the meantime our Khalifa declared a Holy War (Jihad) against the Allies & we must have fought for our Khalifate. As we were [all] English loyal soldiers, we might not fight against England but we thought it better to go over to the Turks our Muslim fellows. There they treated us like their brothers, but sent us with other war prisoners to imprisonment, there we remained for some time but afterwards the Turks told us that we were sending you to your brother country & brought us here in Germany. They wanted to use us for their purpose in sending us to the Oriental countries to serve them, we however refused to serve them & did not go to our country under our undesirable conditions for that they let us in imprisonment in the Lager and treated us severely like the others. Now we are willing to go to our country if we will be benefitted by the King’s Clemency Order & Amnesty issued before the last few months for the Indians. We should be satisfied by the King’s Amnesty. We have done nothing against our Govt. only that we

802 IOR L/MIL/7/18899, letter from Passport Control Officer, Berlin, June 25, 1920.
did not fight against our Khalifa & it was our religious duty to do so. During this long
time we remained neutral & did not serve the British enemy. We have served our Govt &
our nations the Afridis also helped the British Govt during the Great War. Now we are
starving we have nothing to live with. We hope you would be kindly enough to send for
our Amnesty & feed us till we leave for our country. For this act of kindness we should
pray for your long & prosperity.

We are your most obedient servants Mir Baz Khan &
Mir Zamir Afridis Afghans. Charlottenburg

The soldiers, so long as they remained in Berlin, were beyond the reach of British
central authorities. The most the India Office could do was deny the soldiers’ request.
An internal memo from the India Office noted, “The suggestion that the men who
deserted to the enemy in the war should be pardoned, because of ‘the possible danger to
the Empire’ involved in their stay in Germany, seems thoroughly unsound from the point
of view of the effect produced on the men who did not desert.”\textsuperscript{803} The War Office
verified that in no case had any pardon been given for Indian deserters.\textsuperscript{804} The India
Office denied the pardon, and, as best we can tell, Mir Baz Khan and Mir Zamir
remained in Berlin.

Other soldiers appealed to British friends and acquaintances to help secure safe
transport home. One of these was Havildar Abdul Aziz Khan, an Afghan from Peshawar,
who enlisted in the Indian Army at the outbreak of the war and served with the 9th
Hodson’s Horse in France. He was taken prisoner sometime in 1914 or 1915 by the
Germans and spent the remainder of the war as a prisoner of war in Germany. Released at
the end of the war, he lived in a London YMCA with other former Indian POWs until

\textsuperscript{803} IOR L/MIL/7/18899, India Office, internal memo, 1920.
\textsuperscript{804} IOR L/MIL/7/18899, note from the War Office, July 22, 1920.
April 1919 when the authorities placed him on a boat for India. Upon arriving in Bombay, he was placed under arrest by the local authorities, suspected of feeding information to the Germans while in captivity. A confidential memo from the Government of India to the India Office read: “The Government of India had been warned in regard to the possibility that the Germans had taken steps to tutor Indian prisoners of war for propaganda purposes” and that “they could not afford to run the risk of setting suspects at liberty, particularly at a time of internal disturbance and with trouble on the frontier of India.” The Chief Commissioner and Agent to the Governor General of the North-West Province, within whose jurisdiction Abdul Aziz Khan’s home was situated, “was unwilling to allow men suspected of contamination to return to the North-West Frontier Province at [this] juncture.” 805

While in prison, the Havildar wrote a letter to a Captain in the 2/125th Rifles, stationed in Poona. “How unjust it is to suspect people who have already suffered for four years in France and Germany,” Khan stated. “And a shocking thing they have put us with four other Indians in a small room of 4 sq. yards.” Authorities denied the men blankets or beds, he lamented, and the food “is the worst one can imagine.” After 20 days behind bars, the cavalryman protested, “no officer has come to talk to us nor would anybody pay any heed to what we demand. What a cruel shame it is.” 806 But the Army Captain was not the only person to whom the Havildar wrote. Khan utilized the contacts and friendships he made during his time deployed in Europe and wrote a letter to a Ms. Fisher in England. Ms. Fisher, in turn, handed the soldier’s letter to a friend, Mrs. Mary

805 IOR L/MIL/7/18501, confidential memo from the Government of India to the Secretary, Military Department, India Office, October 23, 1919.
806 IOR L/MIL/7/18501, extract of a letter from Havildar Abdul Aziz Khan, May 24, 1919.
Cruikshank, who also appears to have known the man and must have known somebody in the War Office, because her August 1919 letter found its way through the hands of various government offices.

I beg to invite your attention to the enclosed true copy of a letter just received by a friend of mine from an Indian non-commissioned officer of the 9th Hodson’s Horse. This man, Abdul Aziz Khan, who is of good family (his brother being Khan of Zaida near Peshawar) is an Afghan. He enlisted in the Indian Army for the war, & was for some time a prisoner of war in Germany. He was released & came to England in December or January of the last winter, & remained in London staying at a Y.M.C.A. hostel with other released Indian soldiers until April 1st when he left England with two other Indian soldiers & proceeded overland to Taranto, whence he sailed for India. During his stay in England, he was not, to my knowledge, under any suspicion, he appeared free to go anywhere he wished in London. He also paid a short visit to my friend in Leicestershire. Some weeks ago I saw a letter from him dated about June 25th in which he said he had been arrested on arrival at Bombay: the officer who arrested him refused to give any reason, saying that he would learn when he got to Poona …

Havildar Khan wrote from India to Ms. Fisher: “You must be very sorry to know that these pages are written by me in utter sadness … On 3rd May I landed in Bombay. Immediately I and another man, who also has come with me from England and is my countryman were put under arrest. I tried to know the reason of the sudden calamity and failed. Even till today nothing can I know but what I have gathered is that the government suspect me, why and how rests with the government.” The man’s letter continues, noting that his family, who had been awaiting his arrival, has no idea where he is. “They may be thinking I am drowned in the sea, for I never dare wrote a word since the suspense. I tell

807 IOR L/MIL/7/18501, letter from Mrs. Mary Cruikshank to the War Office, August 10, 1919.
you dear Ms. Fisher I feel awfully shy to write to anyone of my present circumstances. It would be a big shock to my sister, brothers and friends to hear.”

Not long after Mrs. Cruikshank appealed to the War Office on the behalf of the soldier and Ms. Fisher, authorities in India released the Havildar. “It has now been decided that it would not be in the interests of the service to retain Dafadar Abdul Aziz Khan and he has accordingly been discharged,” the aforementioned secret memo from the Government of India reads.

Other soldiers, some drawing on resources provided by the German government, secured their own transportation home. In October 1916, four Afridi Volunteers, still in Constantinople half a year after leaving Zossen, tried to secure funding from the German government for transportation across the Middle East to the Persian border. The men wanted their own rifles returned to them in addition to new German rifles and Turkish uniforms. They were willing to fight, they said. But first, one of the men, Lala Gai, wanted a promotion to the rank of Havildar and 400 rupees, “which the British owe him for his services,” and he said, “should be paid as he is a deserter and helped the Germans in some way at the front in France.”

After settling at first in Charlottenburg, Berlin, Havildar Guli Jan of the 58th Rifles, who deserted from his battalion on the night of March 2-3, 1915, navigated the landscape of civil war torn Russia and central Asia with a wife and infant in tow. As far as the British could tell, Guli Jan disappeared at the end of the war. In October 1923, he suddenly reappeared when his German wife walked into the

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808 IOR L/MIL/7/18501, letter from Havildar Khan to Ms. Fisher.
809 IOR L/MIL/7/18501, confidential memo from the Government of India to the Secretary, Military Department, India Office, October 23, 1919.
810 PAAA R21260, Champakaraman Pillai to Dr. Weber at the German Embassy in Constantinople, October 24, 1916.
British Legation in Kabul, Afghanistan and asked for a permit to visit India. As the story goes, she and her husband lived in Danzig until November 1920 and travelled to Afghanistan by way of Riga, Moscow, Tashkent, Kushk, Herat and Kandahar, reaching Kabul in March 1921. In July 1923, the German woman – who we only know by the name Rabinski – left her husband. She appealed to the British Government to allow her to stay in Delhi until she could prevail upon her husband to give up their daughter, aged 2½, at which time she promised to return to her parents in Danzig. The Government of India refused to grant the woman permission to stay in India, but had no objection to granting her a transit visa on the condition that she could prove that her passage to Europe had been arranged and paid for.\footnote{IOR L/PS/11/237, P4421/1923.}

The repatriation of Indian prisoners of war was fraught with imperial concerns. The assurances of metropolitan propaganda trumpeting the loyalty of India notwithstanding, the demands of total war left the political situation in India more volatile than it had been prior to the war. Soldiers that had collaborated with the enemy during the war, the British believed, might become the catalysts for revolution after the war. In this way, German wartime policy and imperial anxieties profoundly shaped British postwar policy vis-à-vis former Indian prisoners of war. Indian soldiers, however, did not simply allow British policy to dictate their fates after the war. Some soldiers chose to remain in Berlin, beyond the reach of British military authorities. Still others appealed to friends and acquaintances in England to secure safe passage home. A small number managed to secure what they could from the German government before the end of the war in order
to best ensure their chances of returning home. Guli Jan, along with his wife and child, safely returned to Afghanistan across a landscape torn apart by civil war.

**Conclusion**

We have come full circle. The decision to deploy Indian soldiers to Europe in 1914 both embedded and upended the British Empire. The withdrawal of Indian soldiers from Europe – the infantry at the end of 1915 and prisoners of war at the end of 1918 – presented similar rewards and risks. If withdrawn too soon, the Indian infantry might become a lightning rod for criticism of the British Empire. If withdrawn too late, the sepoys might mutiny, or there might simply be nothing left of the Lahore and Meerut Divisions. At the end of the war, the British tried to ensure that only “loyal” soldiers returned home safely. Yet while imperial policy no doubt impeded Indians’ return to the Subcontinent considerably, it did not halt it altogether. Some soldiers settled in Berlin. Still others found their own way home. At the time when Guli Jan of the 58th Rifles returned to Afghanistan, seven years had passed since he and thousands of other sepoys embarked at Karachi for the Western Front.
Conclusion

Far more than questions of military efficiency shaped the lived experiences of the nearly 138,000 Indian soldiers who fought in France during the First World War. Even while the decision had only a marginal impact on the final outcome on the Western Front, the deployment of Indian soldiers to Europe readily became a complex and multi-layered imperial moment, one that continued to resonate for audiences and policymakers in Britain, Germany and India long after the Indian infantry withdrew from France in late 1915. In Britain, newspapers like the Times, in addition to amateur and professional propagandists alike, returned to this imperial moment throughout the war in order to silence the Empire’s internal and external critics and shore up support for Britain’s imperial presence in India. In a penny pamphlet on India and the War, published in 1914, Sir Ernest Trevelyan wrote that since the outbreak of the war with Germany, “a wave of enthusiasm seems to have passed over not only the whole of the British Empire in India, but throughout Hindustan. There has not been a single note of discord. Every class and every race have shown their loyalty and their anxiety to take their share of the burdens and duties of citizens of the Empire.”

In the Punjab, however, newspapers routinely referenced the same imperial moment in order to alter the imperial relationship and undo the Empire’s racial hierarchies. In Lahore, the Urdu-language newspaper Zamindar noted in its October 16, 1914 issue that the war and India’s involvement in it would have one significant advantage: Indian self-government as compensation for the services of Indians during the

war, and the removal of racial barriers within the Empire. The Punjab supplied almost 60 percent of all Indian soldiers recruited during the war.813 “Our sepoys who have gone to the front will see Europe with their own eyes,” noted Zamindar.

They will see European institutions and will see that there is no difference – except in colour – between Indians and Europeans. Their ideas will broaden and this will naturally have some effect on their fellow countrymen. We hail with joy the approaching day of our liberty and we feel that it is not far distant.814

Just what the world war might mean for the British Empire in India, in other words, was hardly a foregone conclusion in 1914. India’s involvement and the deployment of sepoys to Europe could either bolster the imperial status quo, or unsettle it.

German newspapers and propagandists also contested the significance of the deployment of Indian soldiers to Europe. Some newspapers, like the Deutsche Tageszeitung, dismissed any military contribution the sepoys might make, preferring to reassure home audiences of Germany’s inevitable victory. Speculating that the number of Indian soldiers deployed to France “could hardly be a significant number,” a September 30, 1914 edition of the newspaper chimed, “It should also be noted that there are those in England who doubt that the native Indians will be able to endure the autumn and winter climate of Central Europe.”815 Other propagandists were more ambitious and tried to seize upon the imperial moment in order to foment rebellion within India and the Indian army. Indian revolutionaries employed by the German Foreign Office visited the front where they took photographs of dead sepoys for publication in Indian presses in the

815 “Indische Truppen in Marseille?” Deutsche Tageszeitung, September 30, 1914.
United States and Asia. Other propagandists, who believed that Indian soldiers “nourish and cherish the hope of national liberation as a religious ideal,” published pamphlets for distribution over the Indian trenches, imploring the men to mutiny and kill their British officers. At a prisoner of war camp outside Berlin, emissaries from the Ottoman Empire lectured captured sepoys on the German-Ottoman alliance and tried to recruit “converts” for a jihad directed at the British, French and Russian Empires.

The Indian sepoys, far from being mere pawns on the imperial chessboard, were keenly aware of the global and imperial countercurrents shaping their experiences on the Western Front and engaged with and even reshaped those currents to suit their immediate, local needs. With so many voices in London, Lahore, and Berlin speaking on behalf of the sepoys, it is important not to lose sight of the myriad ways imperial subalterns managed to speak on their own behalf during the war. To be sure, the overwhelming majority of the troops remained loyal and went over the top every time their commanders ordered them to do so. As the headstones and memorials scattered across France and England remind us, many thousands paid for this loyalty with their lives. Some, while they fought doggedly at the front, wrote letters home imploring friends and family members not to enlist. Others still took a rare opportunity in early 1915 to desert to the German lines in the hope that the Kaiserreich might offer them a chance to return home. A few actually made it. A dozen got as far as Northern Persia before British agents caught up with them. They spent the rest of the war in prison in Karachi. Still others, after spending much of the war in captivity at a prison camp outside Berlin, or

816 Political Archives of the Foreign Office, Berlin [hereafter PAAA] R21244, Zimmermann to the Chief of the Army General Staff, December 29, 1914.
817 PAAA R21070, Paul Walter, “Indien und der Weltkrieg,” n.d.
reenlisting in the Turkish Army, chose to remain in Berlin after the war, fearing interrogation and a lengthy prison sentence if they fell back into British hands.

The movement of human beings across the face of the planet during the First World War made the event global. The encounters and connections people made facilitated a worldwide conversation about the policy and practice of imperialism and revolution, of racism and imperial hierarchies. A traditional military history, one that granted primacy to generals and battlefield tactics, would have been woefully inadequate to the task at hand in this project. Empires and imperial ideologies shaped the lived experiences of human beings in everyday places. Accordingly, this work has examined some of the intimate frontiers of the British and German Empires. As Indian soldiers moved from site to site within Europe – from the docks at Marseilles in 1914 to the trenches outside Ypres; to the wards at the Kitchener Hospital in Brighton and the barracks at the Halbmondlager in Zossen – they encountered the ideologies and hierarchies of imperial rule. In many of these places, they encountered a stubborn reminder of their racial “otherness,” that they were outsiders, and that the British did not consider the sepoys to be on an equal footing with the Empire’s white subjects. To varying degrees, Indian soldiers resisted the policies and expectations of their European hosts. Malingering in hospital, feigning enthusiasm for the jihad, imploring friends and family members to hide from British recruiters – these everyday acts of resistance, when widely practiced, limited the aspirations of British military commanders and policy makers.

The conversation about India’s contribution to the war did not abate after the guns went quiet on the Western Front. After more than four years of slaughter, many people
wondered how the world might possibly remember the rolls of dead, a fact not lost on scholars of the First World War. Sir Walter Lawrence recognized the potential imperial and political capital that could be gained from honoring the Empire’s war dead as early as 1915. Collaborating with a local Maulvi, he arranged for Muslim burial near a mosque in Woking. In France, sepoys who died of their wounds at the Jesuit College in Boulogne had their remains interred at an Indian cemetery. “Cremation is most thorough,” Lawrence observed in his final report, “and His Highness, the Raja of Ratlam, expressed his warmest thanks for the way in which the Hindus were cremated.” As for the many thousands of Indians who died fighting at the front in France, Lawrence noted, “on historical, as well as on political grounds, it seems most desirable to erect worthy memorials to the Indians who fell so far from their homes.”

When the Imperial War Graves Commission received its Royal Charter on May 21, 1917, its Vice-Chairman, Fabian Ware, set to work preserving the graves of the dead not only for bereaved friends and relatives, but “to keep alive the ideals for … which they have laid down their lives … and to promote a feeling of common citizenship and of loyalty and devotion to Us [the monarch] and to the Empire of which they are subjects.” And so, every so often in Western Europe, one comes across the headstones of Indians soldiers, or memorials dedicated to fallen sepoys. At a quiet little military

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819 TNA WO 32/5110, Report by Walter Lawrence to the Secretary of State for War, March 8, 1916.
820 Quoted in John Lack and Bart Ziino, “Requiem for empire: Fabian Ware and the Imperial War Graves Commission,” in Andrew T. Jarboe and Richard S. Fogarty, *Empires in World War I*, cited with permission from the authors.
cemetery in Zehrensdorf, just 50 kilometers south of Berlin, lie the remains of 206 sepoys who died while interned at the nearby Halbmondlager. At Neuve Chapelle, the War Graves Commission unveiled the Indian Memorial in 1927. The memorial’s registry lists the names of over 5,000 Indian soldiers. The headstones and memorials in England, France and Germany are reminders of the globality of the First World War, that the conflict was a war of empires, one in which many thousands of imperial subjects paid the ultimate price.

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