
India Looks Back on the First World War

SHASHI THAROOR

One hundred years after the “guns of August” boomed across the European continent, the world has been steeped in commemorations of that seminal event. The Great War, as it was called then, was described as “the war to end all wars.” Ironically, the eruption of an even more destructive conflict twenty years later meant that it is now known as the First World War. Those who fought and died in the First World War would have had little idea that there would so soon be a Second.

While the war took the flowers of Europe’s youth to their premature graves, snuffing out a generation of talented poets, artists, and others whose genius bled into the trenches, it also involved soldiers from faraway lands who had little to do with Europe’s bitter traditional hatreds. The roles and sacrifices of Australians, New Zealanders, Canadians, and South Africans have been celebrated for some time in books and novels, and even rendered immortal on celluloid in award-winning films like “Gallipoli” and “Chinook Bair.” Of the 1.3 million Indian troops who served in the conflict, however, we hear very little.

As many as 74,187 Indian soldiers died during the war, and another 67,000 were wounded. Their stories—and their heroism—have long been omitted from popular histories of the war, or relegated to footnotes. India contributed a number of divisions and brigades to the European,

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Mediterranean, West Asian, North African, and East African theaters of war. In Europe, Indian soldiers were among the first victims who suffered the horrors of the trenches. They were killed in droves before the war was even into its second year, and they bore the brunt of many a German offensive.

It was Indian *jawans* who stopped the German advance at Ypres in the autumn of 1914, soon after the war broke out—while the British were still recruiting and training their own forces. More than a thousand of them died at Gallipoli, thanks to Churchill's folly. Nearly 700,000 Indian

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sepoys fought in Mesopotamia against the Ottoman Empire, Germany's ally, many of them Indian Muslims taking up arms against their co-religionists in defense of the British Empire.

The most painful experiences were those of soldiers fighting in the trenches of Europe. Letters sent by Indian soldiers in France and Belgium to their family members in their villages back home speak an evocative language of cultural dislocation and tragedy.

"The shells are pouring like rain in the monsoon," declared one. "The corpses cover the country like sheaves of harvested corn," wrote another.¹

These men were undoubtedly heroes: pitchforked into battle in unfamiliar lands, in cold, harsh climatic conditions they were neither used to nor prepared for fighting an enemy of whom they had no knowledge, risking their lives every day for little more than honor. Yet they were destined to remain largely unknown once the war was over: neglected by the British, for whom they fought, and ignored by their own country, from which they came.

Part of the reason is precisely that they were not fighting for their own country. The soldiers were all volunteers: soldiering was their profession. They served the very British Empire that was oppressing their own people back home.

To raise men and money from India, as well as large supplies of food, cash, and ammunition, the British taxed Indians and the nominally autonomous princely states. It was estimated at the time that the value of India's contribution in cash and kind amounted to 88 million pounds sterling, worth some 30 billion pounds in today's money. To inspire this exploitation of Indian coffers, the British had insincerely promised to deliver self-rule to India at the end of the war. Perhaps, had they kept that pledge, the

sacrifices of India's First World War soldiers might have been seen in their homeland as a contribution to India's freedom.

But the British broke their word despite strong support for the war effort from Indian leaders. Mahatma Gandhi, who returned to his homeland for good from South Africa in January 1915, supported the war, as he had supported the British in the Boer War. India was wracked by high taxation—and the high inflation accompanying it—to support the war, while the disruption of trade caused by the conflict led to widespread economic losses. All this while the country was reeling from a raging influenza epidemic that took many lives. Yet Indian nationalists did not seek to take advantage of Britain's vulnerability by inciting rebellions, or even disturbances, against the Empire. Instead, Indians rallied to the British cause: there were no mutinies against the British, though political unrest did continue in Punjab and Bengal.

By 1917, as the Allies—newly reinforced by the United States—began assuming the upper hand in the war, Indian nationalists began demanding recognition of their compatriots' sacrifices. Sir Edwin Montagu, the Secretary of State for India, responded with the historic "August announcement" in Parliament, declaring that Britain's policy for India was "increasing association of Indians in every branch of the administration and the gradual development of self-governing institutions with a view to the progressive realization of responsible government in India as an integral part of the British Empire."² This was widely understood to mean that at the end of the war India would receive the Dominion status hitherto reserved for the "White Commonwealth."

It was not to be. When the war ended in triumph for Britain, India was denied its promised reward. Instead of self-government, the British imposed the repressive Rowlatt Act, which vested the Viceroy's government with extraordinary powers to quell "sedition" against the Empire by silencing and censoring the press, detaining political activists without trial, and arresting without a warrant any individuals suspected of treason against the Empire. Public protests against this draconian legislation were ruthlessly quelled. The worst incident was the Jallianwalla Bagh massacre of April 1919, when Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer ordered his troops to fire, without warning, on 15,000 unarmed and non-violent men, women, and children demonstrating peacefully in an enclosed garden in Amritsar, killing 1,499 and wounding 1,137.³

The fact that the British hailed Dyer as a hero, raising a handsome purse to reward him for his deed, marked the final rupture between British imperialism and its Indian subjects. The wartime hopes of Dominion

status and “progressive self-government” were dashed forever; Gandhi and the nationalists concluded that nothing short of independence would end the immoral injustice of British rule in India.

With British perfidy providing such a sour ending to the narrative of a war in which India had given its all and been spurned in return, Indian

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nationalists felt that the country had nothing for which to thank its soldiers. They had merely gone abroad to serve their foreign masters. Losing life or limb in a foreign war fought at the behest of colonial rulers was an occupational hazard; it did not qualify to be hailed as a form of national service, or so most Indian nationalists thought. And so, they allowed the heroism of their compatriots to be forgotten. When the world commemorated the 50th Anniversary of the First World

War in 1964, there was scarcely a mention of India’s soldiers anywhere, least of all in India.

India’s absence from the commemorations, as well as its failure to honor the dead, was not a surprise. Nor was the lack of First World War memorials in the country: the general feeling was that India, freshly freed from the imperial yoke, was ashamed of its soldiers’ participation in a colonial war and saw nothing to celebrate.

The British, on the other hand, were unabashed. They commemorated the war by constructing the triumphal arch known as India Gate in New Delhi. Built in 1931, India Gate is a popular monument, visited by hundreds daily, few of whom have any idea that it commemorates the Indian soldiers who lost their lives fighting in the war. Indeed, historical amnesia about the First World War is pervasive across India.

In the absence of a national war memorial, though, many Indians see the India Gate as the only venue to pay homage to those who have lost their lives in more recent conflicts. I have stood there many times, on the anniversaries of wars with China and Pakistan, and bowed my head without a thought for the men who died in foreign fields a century ago.

As a Member of Parliament of India, I had twice raised the demand for a national war memorial, and been twice told there were no plans to construct one here in India. It was therefore personally satisfying to me, and to many of my compatriots, when the Government of India announced in

its budget for 2014-15 its intention finally to create a national war memorial. We are not a terribly militaristic society, but for a nation that has fought many wars and shed the blood of many heroes, and whose resolve may yet be tested in conflicts to come, it seems odd that there is no memorial to commemorate, honor, and preserve the memories of those who have fought for India.

It appears the centenary is finally forcing a rethink. Remarkable photographs have been unearthed of Indian soldiers in Europe and the Middle East, and these are enjoying a new lease of life online. Looking at them, it is impossible not to be moved by these young men, so visibly alien to their surroundings, some about to head off for battle, others nursing terrible wounds.

For many Indians, curiosity has overcome the fading colonial-era resentments of British exploitation. We are beginning to see the Indian soldiers of the First World War as human beings, who took the spirit of their country to battlefields abroad. The Center for Armed Forces Historical Research in Delhi is painstakingly working to retrieve memorabilia of that era and reconstruct the forgotten story of the 1.3 million Indian soldiers

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who had fought in the war. Some of the letters are unbearably poignant, especially those urging relatives back home not to commit the folly of enlisting in a futile cause. Others hint at delights officialdom frowned upon, some Indian soldiers' appreciative comments about the receptivity of Frenchwomen to their attentions, for instance.

Astonishingly, only one novel has emerged from the perspective of the Indian troops: Mulk Raj Anand's "Across the Black Waters" is the tale of a *sepooy*, Lalu, dispossessed from his land and fighting in a war he cannot understand, only to return to his village to find he has lost everything and everyone who mattered to him. Perhaps the only other novel about Indians in the war is John Masters' "The Ravi Lancers," which is, inevitably, a Briton's account that culminates in an Indian unit deciding to fight on in Europe "because we gave our word to serve."

But Indian literature touched on the war experience in one tragic tale. When the great British poet Wilfred Owen (author of the greatest anti-war poem in the English language, "Dulce et Decorum Est") was to return to the front to give his life in the futile First World War, he recited an Indian poet's "parting words" to his mother as his last goodbye. That poet,

Rabindranath Tagore, had won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 and had been knighted by the British, but he returned the honor to the Crown in protest against the Jallianwallah Bagh massacre. When Wilfred Owen was so tragically and pointlessly killed, his mother found Tagore's poem copied out in her son's hand in his diary:

*When I go from hence
let this be my parting word,
that what I have seen is unsurpassable.*

*I have tasted of the hidden honey of this lotus
that expands on the ocean of light,
and thus am I blessed
—let this be my parting word.*

*In this playhouse of infinite forms
I have had my play
and here have I caught sight of him that is formless.*

*My whole body and my limbs
have thrilled with his touch who is beyond touch;
and if the end comes here, let it come
—let this be my parting word.*

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission maintains war cemeteries in India, mostly commemorating the Second World War rather than the First. The most famous epitaph of them all is inscribed at the Kohima War Cemetery in Northeast India. It reads, "When you go home, tell them of us and say: For your tomorrow, we gave our today."

The Indian soldiers who died in the First World War could make no such claim. They gave their "todays" for someone else's "yesterdays." They left behind orphans, but history has orphaned them as well. As Imperialism has bitten the dust, it is recalled increasingly for its repression and racism; its soldiers, when not reviled, are largely regarded as having served an unworthy cause.

But they were men who did their duty as they saw it. And they were Indians. It is a matter of quiet satisfaction that their overdue rehabilitation has now begun in their own country. *f*

ENDNOTES

- 1 Collection of letters from the Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research, New Delhi.
- 2 House of Commons, *Parliamentary Debates*, 5th Series, 97, c. 1695-6, August 20, 1917
- 3 A. S. Dudi, *Modern History of India* (Pinnacle Technology, 2012, eBook).