

“I Shall Die Arms in Hand, Wearing the Warriors’ Clothes”: Mobilisation and Initial Operations of the Indian Army in France and Flanders

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ABSTRACT

The performance of the Indian Corps in France in the first months of the war was mixed: there were setbacks and also considerable successes. The fundamental and often unacknowledged problem, however, was that the Indian Army was simply not designed for a major war fought in multiple theatres. The Indian Corps’ pre-war weaknesses in numbers of qualified junior officers or trained reservists were painfully exposed in the costly battles of 1914-15 in France, while commitments in East Africa, Mesopotamia, Egypt and later in Palestine overstretched resources. This article evaluates the performance of the Indian Army in the first months of the war and sets it in the context of pre-war assumptions and wartime experiences.

The performance of the Indian Army in the first months of the war was decidedly mixed. While there were episodes of great courage, resolution and resilience, there was also setback, chaotic haste and disorganisation. On the one hand, the outbreak of war was greeted with the same enthusiasm that prevailed in Europe, with only a handful of dissenting voices, and India went on to produce 1.3 million volunteers. These men fought as far afield as France and Flanders, in East Africa, at Gallipoli, in Palestine and Mesopotamia. Some 47,746 were killed in the course of their duties, and a further 65,000 were wounded, the greatest toll being caused by disease. The Indian Army earned a number of gallantry awards, and the citations for the Victoria Cross are inspirational. Yet, on the other hand, the bulk of the Indian Corps was withdrawn from Europe after a few months of fighting because its losses, particularly the high proportion of officers, were unsustainable. The apparent deterioration of the Indian Corps in France confirmed widespread fears at the time that Indian troops might not be reliable in a European war. The reason for these mixed results lies in the pre-war period. In 1903, the Army in India had been restructured to provide internal and border security with a very small expeditionary force. It was simply not designed for a major war fought in multiple theatres and its weaknesses in being able

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to generate sufficient numbers of qualified junior officers or trained reservists were painfully exposed.

This article does not make any special claim to original research, but rather concentrates on the context of the Indian Army's deployment to Europe in the first months of the war in order to complement other articles covering the same period. It should also be noted that only the briefest selection of the extensive historiography is offered here, since to catalogue the various directions of scholarship might distract the reader from the simple purpose of the article.

Mobilisation

When the Viceroy declared war on India's behalf, there was a sincere and positive response from many Indian leaders and organisations: the All India Muslim League, Punjab Provincial Congress, the princely states and many thousands of individuals expressed their loyalty to the British Empire and its King-Emperor. Gandhi, not yet well-known across the subcontinent, tendered a resolution to the Indian National Congress for unconditional service to the Empire. Offers of money, horses, medics, hospital ships and ambulances were made, and 21 of the 27 princes' Imperial Service Troops contingents, a percentage of whom had been trained to the same standards of the British Indian Army, were mobilised. The Nizam of Hyderabad committed troops and gave 60 lakhs of rupees (£400,000). The Maharajah of Mysore gave a further 50 lakhs (£333,000). In some rural districts there were more volunteers than could be taken into the army, although wealthy landowners competed with each other to 'give' larger and larger numbers of men they had selected.¹ Enthusiasm and cohesion were not in doubt, the Jodhpur Lancers, for example, were even commanded by their septuagenarian Regent-Maharajah, Major General Sir Pratab Singh. Problems lay in the organisation, training and capabilities of the force.

The Indian Army of 1914 was a long-service profession but lacked sufficient trained reserves to be able to regenerate in the event of significant casualties.² Its primary task had been to act as a frontier force. Many of its personnel were drawn from the north and west, close to the most sensitive frontiers where guerrilla warfare waged by recalcitrant tribes and opportunist Afghan incursions were the most frequent threat, although until 1905 there remained the more distant possibility of a Russian confrontation. Frontier fighting had required well-trained units with the cohesion to

¹ Philip Mason, *The Men Who Ruled India* (London: Guild, 1985; previously *The Guardians*, II, 1954), p. 283.

² Government of India, *The Army in India and its Evolution* (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Publishing, 1924), p. 219.

withstand demoralising insurgency but casualties had, on the whole, been light.³ The fighting had offered sufficient hazard to reinforce one's personal *izzat* (honour) or sense of fate, demonstrate attachment to one's officer and unit, and earn decorations and promotion without a high probability of death. The Pashtun tribes' habit of murdering the wounded and mutilating the dead meant that heroic efforts were always made to recover casualties, which again reinforced cohesion.

Service in Indian regiments tended to deter the rapid turnover of personnel and therefore did not generate a large cadre of reservists.⁴ To qualify for a pension soldiers had to serve 25 years. By contrast, three-year short service men, who could take opportunities for periodic retraining, were few and far between and in any case insufficiently trained to be useful. Often, sickness and civilian employment rendered ex-soldiers unfit for further military service. The result was an army of some experience in mountain warfare, cohesive, with a strong sense of its exclusive identity, but without any notion of formation level operations or high-intensity European war.

The other peculiarity of the Indian Army was the organisation of the officers. Each infantry battalion had 12 European officers and subordinated to them, regardless of experience, were 17 Indian Officers carrying the Viceroy's Commission. Together they commanded 729 ranks and 42 civilian 'commissariat' followers. In the cavalry the proportions were the same. In 1914 there were 139 infantry battalions and 39 cavalry regiments, supported by mountain artillery, sappers and miners, pioneer battalions and logisticians. The Indian units were brigaded with British regiments to form the Army in India, while the Indian Army had been reformed into a single force in 1903 following an amalgamation of the old Presidency armies.⁵ There were obvious cultural differences between British and Indian Army units but they were also evident amongst the officer corps.⁶ In the Indian cavalry, the legacy of being 'irregular' and under the personal command of pioneering individuals gave rise to an attitude that praised initiative, carried disdain for parade-ground precision (while exhibiting pride in the most splendid Indian uniforms) and cherished the horses and

³ The most significant losses of the frontier wars occurred in the 1897-98 Pathan Rising. On the Tirah expedition some 287 were killed and a further 853 were wounded but this was exceptional. Captain H.L. Nevill, *Campaigns on the North West Frontier* (London, 1912), p. 301.

⁴ Government of India, *The Army in India*, p. 219.

⁵ Redistribution of the Army in India, 1904, Committee of Imperial Defence 58-D, CAB 6/2. The National Archives.

⁶ George Morton-Jack, *The Indian Army on the Western Front: India's Expeditionary Force to France and Belgium in the First World War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 3.

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sowars (troopers) above all else. The fact that troopers owned their own mounts in the *sillidar* system made the men particularly responsible. In the infantry, Auchinleck described a similar atmosphere of respectful relations between officers and men: 'there was no question of ordering them about – they were yeomen really and that made all the difference'.⁷ Geoff Hamilton described his Indian regiment as 'a happy band and I was intensely proud to be their leader, and they knew it. We fought and played together undeterred by race, rank, class or creed, or age for that matter'.⁸ Brigadier F.J. Dillon recorded that new recruits 'became yours in a much more personal way than in the British Army. You knew all about him, where he came from, what his family [trade] was. You probably visited his village and knew his parents'.⁹ Viceroy's Commissioned Officers, despite their subordination, were the most respected of all and guided young British officers in their role. They were referred to as 'God's Own Gentlemen'. In contrast to most European armies which expected their 'native' soldiers to learn the Europeans' language, in the Indian Army every officer had to learn to speak to his soldiers in their vernacular, not least because he was regarded as the neutral arbiter in any local disputes.¹⁰ The emphasis on personal leadership led to a tendency to lead from the front in combat, but that had its own attractions for young British officers. The appeal of command in the Indian Army was so high that, in 1913, of the top 25 cadets at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst 20 of them opted to join the Indian Army.¹¹

The motivation of the Indian Army was initially not in doubt. A hierarchy of prestige, based on 'fighting quality' and physique, ran through a number of ethnic groups that constituted the army, and each was eager to assert its martial prowess.¹² This competitiveness existed between units recruited on the basis of territorial demarcation as much as on ethnicity, and it was common in 'mixed' units where companies were made up of a particular 'class'. The 6th Bengal Lancers, for example,

⁷ Charles Allen, *Plain Tales from the Raj*, (London: Andre Deutsch-Penguin, 1975), pp. 239-40.

⁸ Cited in Victoria Schofield, *Every Rock, Every Hill: A Plain Tale of the North West Frontier of India and Afghanistan* (London: Buchan and Enright, 1984), p. 159.

⁹ Allen, *Plain Tales*, p. 240.

¹⁰ There were two examinations, with further training in specialist languages as required.

¹¹ Incidentally, Auchinleck succeeded; Montgomery failed. Charles Chenevix Trench, *The Indian Army and the King's Enemies, 1900-1947* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), p. 25.

¹² There is an extensive literature on the martial races, but a clear explanation is given in David Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj: The Politics of the Indian Army, 1860-1940* (London: Macmillan, 1994). For a contemporary view, see George MacMunn, *The Martial Races of India* (London: Sampson Low, 1933).

consisted of one Muslim squadron, one Hindu and one Sikh, with the Headquarters Squadron made up of troops from all three 'classes'.¹³ Half of the regular army was drawn from the Punjab, and even regiments designated with particular regional titles might actually contain a cross-section of more competitive groups.¹⁴ However, there was also a trait amongst some groups to enlist for the 'fight' rather than identity *per se*. There are countless accounts of British personnel describing the characteristics of classes, and of reciprocal responses by the men themselves.¹⁵ Although discredited by scholars today, the British used the 'character' of the men under their command as a guide for some sort of understanding. Alongside exceptional courage, Mahsuds had a reputation for fanatical behaviour and the occasional murder of their officers; they prided themselves on being '*Mizh der beitabora khalqi-i*' ('We are an untrustworthy people'). Pathans generally were 'athletic' but possessed a 'swaggering gait'.¹⁶ Sikhs were 'sturdy lions' with a 'stately bearing'. Dogras were allegedly 'quiet, reliable, well-behaved, courageous but lacked the Pathans' native cunning'.¹⁷ Jats were 'worthy and slightly dull', while Gurkhas were 'nice little fellows, excellent, aggressive infantry though a trifle thick, liable (like everyone else) to have their off-days'.¹⁸

It was to the credit of the pre-war planners that the Indian Army had a scheme for mobilisation and deployment, with specialist equipment, in place when the war broke out. India had two infantry divisions and one cavalry brigade available for immediate operations.¹⁹ Nevertheless, there were problems from the outset. The call-up occurred in August when most personnel were on leave and, in an age before information technologies, it took a little while to make contact with everyone, especially soldiers up in the hills. The depot system, which was supposed to operate as the rear link for deploying units, handling call ups, reservists, pensions and discharges was completely overwhelmed and remained chaotic well into 1915. While units made their way to Bombay relatively quickly, the entire force was deficient in

¹³ Francis Ingall, *The Last of the Bengal Lancers* (London: Leo Cooper, 1988), p. 5.

¹⁴ The 129th Baluchis, for example, despite the title, contained no Baluchis but was made up of Pashtuns, Mahsuds and Punjabis. In Wilde's Rifles, there were companies consisting of Dogras, Pathans, Punjabis and Sikhs.

¹⁵ Santanu Das, *Race, Empire and First World War Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹⁶ J.W.B. Merewether, *The Indian Corps in France* (London: John Murray, 1919).

¹⁷ Trench, *Indian Army*, p. 28.

¹⁸ Trench, *Indian Army*, p. 28.

¹⁹ A further 5 cavalry brigades could be deployed with sufficient notice., Indian Expeditionary Force A, War Diary (Simla, October 1914), p. 136. India Office Records (IOR), L/Mil/17/5/3088 British Library (BL).

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artillery and possessed only two machine guns per battalion.²⁰ Insufficient numbers of troop ships meant 30 vessels had to be hurriedly converted. As bewildered sepoy embarked, many of them on a ship for the first time, their officers struggled to contain the rumours about their destination, which varied from guarding the Suez Canal to joining the fighting in Europe. Most thought the greatest risk was that the war would be over before they arrived, but, in the short term, there were more prosaic preoccupations about rations, stores and orders to re-organise from their standard eight companies into the British model of four companies.²¹ While the Lahore and Meerut Divisions (Force 'A') assembled, efforts were also made to get back British officers on the reserve list with the Indian Army. Of the 47 available, half were swept up in the corresponding British mobilisation. There were also too few Indian reservists to provide for the ten per cent of the strength anticipated for battle casualty replacements.

Deployment to France

The initial deployments were also a mixed success. It was remarkable that two entire divisions could be transported with most of their equipment so rapidly to the far side of the world and prepared for any operations. Nevertheless, there were still significant gaps in the readiness and the ability to sustain enduring operations in the Indian Corps.²² Force A had disembarked briefly at Suez before setting off for France where the first division landed at Marseilles on 26 September. There it was issued with the newer Mark III Lee Enfield Rifle, conducted marches, organised stores, was allocated liaison officers and established a camp. Transport was provided in the form of London butchers' carts, but, apart from the distribution of some greatcoats, the troops wore their light tropical uniforms. There was considerable enthusiasm amongst the French for the newly-arrived Indian troops and the soldiers experienced a form of culture shock, remarking in their letters on the existence of aircraft, women working in agriculture, strange food and, for Muslim troops, the alleged idolatry of the pork-eating French.

From Marseilles, the Indian Corps was moved by rail to Ypres to relieve the shattered British Second Corps, and their contribution helped stabilise the line at a

²⁰ Sir Moore Creagh, the former CiCI, had demanded modern arms and equipment to fulfil Kitchener's planned expeditionary force capabilities but the government and his successor as CiCI deferred the decision on grounds of cost. Even after six months of war the Government of India remained on a peacetime footing with regard to military expenditure.

²¹ Reorganisation, 1861-1936. IOR, L/Mil/7/120,

²² Logistics, for example, had to fit into a British Army system, with which the Indian Army was unfamiliar. H. Alexander, *On Two Fronts, Being the Adventures of an Indian Mule Corps in France and Gallipoli* (New York: Dutton, 1917), p. 42.

time when manpower shortages were critical.²³ From the railheads, the 129th Baluchis and Wilde's Rifles were transported by bus and rushed into the shallow trenches and ditches to relieve the British cavalry at Wytschaete and Messines. Neither the British cavalry nor the Indian troops, divided into company groups, were supported by sufficient artillery.²⁴ On 22 October a German thrust was only held with the greatest difficulty, most of the casualties being caused by German shell fire. Trenches were flattened, and reinforcing sepoy were forced to lie in the open to repel a German infantry assault. The Baluchis' machine guns, placed in a prominent farm-house, took a direct hit. One company was entirely overrun and wiped out but for the sole survivor Khuda Dad Khan. A similar fate befell the Dogra company of Wilde's Rifles; Jemadar Kapur Singh, realising he was the only survivor, shot himself to prevent his capture; Havildar Gagna, having killed five Germans around him, broke his bayonet in the close-quarter action but snatched up a German officer's sword and accounted for more; he was later found, alive, with six wounds.²⁵ At Neuve Chapelle the village was lost on 28 October when Indian sappers and miners were overwhelmed in another close-quarter battle, and all their officers and over 100 of the 300 men available were killed or wounded. After a week's further fighting, some 500 sepoy were killed.

The accounts of the troops indicate the typical problems of these early days of the war. The Poona Horse *sowars* did not initially take cover in their unfamiliar dismounted role and they had little training in infantry tactics or trench warfare. Consequently their casualties were severe. Fresh night operations were stalled by the inability to seize the high ground that lay to the east of Neuve Chappelle, by the abysmal autumn weather and the evident confusion of troops unfamiliar with the environment.²⁶

From personal accounts we know that some officers struggled to keep their men in place. Captain 'Roly' Grimshaw (Poona Horse) came across some Gurkhas attempting to seek out Germans in No Man's Land on their own initiative, while others were clearly shirking in culverts, ditches and ruins. He explained that 'the sight which met the eyes at daybreak was perfectly revolting ... corpses choked the

²³ Indian Corps War Diary (October-December 1914), WO 95/1090, TNA.

²⁴ J. Willcocks, *With the Indians in France* (London: Constable, 1920), chap. 20.

²⁵ The Battalion had deployed with 11 British officers and 729 Indian Other Ranks; three days' later, five officers and 274 Indians returned: a casualty rate of 63 per cent.

²⁶ Morton-Jack, *Indian Army on the Western Front*, p. 15. He lists the authors endorsing the suffering caused by the climate.

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trenches ... fragments of human beings everywhere. Most of the dead seemed to have been bayoneted, but some had their heads blown clean off.²⁷

Between the shelling and sniping, the greatest hazard was the environment itself. None of the men had waterproofs, braziers, or 'rugs' (blankets). By November the troops were occupying trenches almost brim full of water. At Festubert two men of the 8th Gurkhas drowned within hours of occupying their 'miniature canals'. On 23 November the Germans broke into the Indian lines and several trenches were lost. Close-quarter fighting over the next 24 hours resulted in some of those positions being recovered, but the cost was high. Sikhs and Pathans were described as having lost turbans, revealing their long and straggling hair, matted with mud. All ranks were terribly filthy and often exhausted. Some Gurkhas discarded their boots, complaining that sore feet were worse inside their footwear. There were other unseen and unexpected enemies: a German mine detonated under the Indian lines killed 200 and induced profound shock.

Under these conditions, it is more understandable that Jemadar Mir Mast and 14 Afridis deserted to the relative comfort of the German lines that winter, that there were higher than 'average' statistics of Self-Inflicted Wounds amongst Indian Other Ranks, and that censor reports recorded a lowering of morale.²⁸ Officer casualties were difficult to replace, but the sheer numbers of losses and the nature of the conditions evidently had its effect too.

Operations around Neuve Chapelle

By the following spring, the Indian Corps had to some extent recovered from its emergency deployment. New equipment had arrived and much needed winter clothing along with rifle grenades, Mills bombs, mortars and trench periscopes. Morale improved. Nevertheless, what the Corps lacked was artillery and, without a superior weight of fire support, it was difficult to see how they could retake the objective of Neuve Chapelle, lost to the Germans in October 1914. Since then the village had been prepared extensively for defence, was ringed with wire and its approaches were criss-crossed with water-filled ditches and flooded ground, and the whole area was dominated by German guns on and behind the Aubers Ridge. When the order to retake the village came, all the Allied artillery fire that was available was

²⁷ Captain R. Grimshaw, *Indian Cavalry Officer, 1914-15* (Tunbridge Wells: Costello, 1986), cited in Trench, *Indian Army*, p. 35.

²⁸ J. Greenhut, "'Sahib and Sepoy': An Enquiry into the Relationship between British Officers and Native Soldiers of the British Indian Army", *Military Affairs*, 48 (1984), pp. 16-17; Nominal Roll of Indian prisoners of war suspected of having deserted to the enemy or to have given information or to have otherwise assisted the enemy after capture', List A, secret, L/Mil/17/5/2403 List A. India Office Records, British Library.

concentrated into a short bombardment at dawn on 10 March 1915, and the initial assault by the Garhwali Brigade was successful. By 0930 that day, the Garhwalis were inside the village, although their British officers, characteristically leading from the front, had suffered heavy casualties and the 2/3rd Gurkhas had lost direction and become separated. The usual problems of communication across the debris of the battlefield delayed the arrival of the Dehra Dun Brigade, which was forced to take up a temporary defensive position along Laves Brook, to the west of the village. The Germans counter-attacked, determined to recover their forward strongpoints. This was defeated despite a blizzard of shelling and yet another crop of casualties for the Indian Corps.

Attempts to restart the offensive failed repeatedly. Subsequent attacks in April and May at Festubert and Aubers Ridge were also unsuccessful. Explanations were sought in terms of inadequate artillery support, shell shortages, and criticism of Indian Army staff work.²⁹ Senior Indian Army officers have been criticised for valuing seniority over merit, failing to have sufficient numbers put through staff college, and being unfamiliar with large formation manoeuvres that characterised European warfare. Diversionary operations at Moulin St Piètre by the Indian Corps during the Battle of Loos were marked by a successful assault, but a failure in staff work meant that there were no reserves or supports so that captured ground was enveloped and the leading battalions were compelled to make a fighting retreat.³⁰ Yet, as elsewhere during the First World War, the relentless mathematics of modern warfare, together with the engineering capabilities of the German Army, was the true cause of failure. During the assault on Aubers Ridge on 6th May Allied artillery fire had failed to make much impression on German trenches or their well-revetted strongpoints. As the Dehra Dun brigade rose from the ground some yards ahead of their sodden trenches, following unseasonably heavy rain, the German infantry and machine gunners had a clear field of fire. The German Maxims had been calibrated in advance to fire at just eight inches above the ground, and they scythed down the extended lines with impunity.³¹ In one leading company of 6th Jats every man was killed or wounded before they advanced 100 yards. The 2/2nd Gurkhas lost all their officers and NCOs, but the survivors dashed forward and got to the German trenches where they were all killed or wounded. Just 20 minutes after the assault had begun, the

²⁹ The latter is strongly refuted by Gordon Corrigan, *Sepoys in the Trenches: the Indian Corps on the Western Front, 1914-15* (Stroud: Spellmount, 2006), pp. 168 and 247. See Nikolas Gardner, *Trial by Fire: Command and the British Expeditionary Force in 1914* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), pp. 177-82.

³⁰ John Buchan, *A History of the Great War, I* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1923), pp. 149-150.

³¹ Corrigan, *Sepoys in the Trenches*, pp. 204-207.

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battlefield was empty, save for handfuls of men sheltering in craters and ditches, and strewn across the ground were the wounded and the dead.

Other divisions on alternative axes were also checked, and a second wave, scheduled to take place on the same front of the Dehra Dun Brigade, was cancelled. Nevertheless, it was determined that the Bareilly Brigade would continue with its attack once the communication trenches had been cleared of the wounded. This second assault got barely 30 yards from its start line before it was cut down. Vaughan's Rifles lost 50 per cent killed and wounded in this advance, and the 41st Dogras lost 401 casualties of a strength of 645, including all its officers. The Garwhal Brigade suffered the same fate on 15 and 16 May, being decimated by the sheer weight of fire. When the action concluded on the 18th the gains were pitifully small and the landscape was a scene of Dantean desolation.

The Indian Corps was not limited to operations at Neuve Chapelle and Aubers Ridge. In April the Germans used poison gas to the north-east of Ypres and the Lahore Division was thrust into the gap in the line. Due to confusion about the geography, the division attempted to reach what it believed was the original French front line, only to find that the position had long been abandoned, and, as they pressed on to their objective, vaguely defined as 'the enemy trench', they had to storm across over 1,000 yards of No Man's Land. The attack, with derisory artillery support, was broken up by German fire.³² The Ferozepur Brigade was then subjected to a retaliatory gas attack, which, for troops without any respirators or protection, inflicted severe casualties. Some terrified sepoys fled, but others were rallied by junior leaders like Jemadar Mir Dast, who for his determined resistance, courageous inspiration to others and his insistence on going back out into No Man's Land to recover wounded comrades was awarded the Victoria Cross.³³ A handful of survivors under the command of Major Deacon of the Connaughts with survivors of the Manchesters, far in advance of the rest, grimly clung to the mud and drove off German counter-attacks.³⁴ The division held on, but the gas attack had been another profound shock to the troops.

For some time the deterioration of the Indian Corps had been noted. British regiments in the Army in India had not had the same dislocation over officers, despite similar losses.³⁵ Some British officers posted into the Indian regiments did not speak the language of the soldiers. Losses in Viceroy's Commissioned Officers were

³² Willcocks, *With the Indians in France*, pp. 266-67.

³³ Mir Dast was awarded the VC and was, ironically, the brother of the deserter, who allegedly received an Iron Cross.

³⁴ Corrigan, *Sepoys in the Trenches*, pp. 189-90.

³⁵ Morton-Jack, *Indian Army on the Western Front*, p. 168.

also severe. Familiar faces, who knew the men well, were often now gone.³⁶ Moreover, Indian units had to be reinforced with drafts and, although efforts were made to replace class companies with men of the same background, in the confusion of the early months of the war this had not been possible.³⁷ Despite the larger numbers of reinforcements available by June 1915 the cohesion of the Corps could no longer be guaranteed.³⁸

The decision was taken to move the Indian infantry out of France and relocate them in Middle Eastern theatres where communications with India were shorter and, for those from the plains of India at least, the climate more familiar.³⁹ In any case, the expansion of the campaigns in the Middle East demanded more manpower and the Mesopotamian operations came under the direction of the Indian government.⁴⁰ As is well known, the cavalry stayed on and took part in the larger actions of the war on the Somme, although without success, but the unique composition of the Indian Army, while a strength on frontier operations, had suffered severely under the pressures of very heavy losses and such trying conditions in France and Flanders.⁴¹

Assessments

By the autumn of 1915 the Indian Army had been through a transformative experience, a crucible of war that no one could have conceived of even twelve months before. From a strategic perspective India was secure and, despite German efforts to ignite unrest through Ghadr subversion and Bengali revolutionaries, the subcontinent did not show signs of unrest. Even on the truculent North West Frontier there was only a brief period of resistance by Mahsuds in 1915 and this was contained by a blockade rather than conventional operations. Territorial battalions from Britain released British and Indian Army units for service overseas, thus maintaining the strength of the garrison.⁴² Beyond the frontier, despite the

³⁶ Morton-Jack, *Indian Army on the Western Front*, p. 185.

³⁷ John Merewether and Sir Frederick Smith, *The Indian Corps in France* (London: John Murray, 1919), pp. 462-89; Morton-Jack, *Indian Army on the Western Front*, pp. 19 and pp. 162-5.

³⁸ Merewether and Smith, *The Indian Corps in France*, p.463; Morton-Jack, *Indian Army on the Western Front*, p. 18.

³⁹ George Morton-Jack refutes the idea that the Indian Corps was withdrawn because of suffering from the northern European climate or operational underperformance. See *Indian Army on the Western Front*, p. 157.

⁴⁰ Morton-Jack, *Indian Army on the Western Front*, p. 154.

⁴¹ Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *The Somme* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 139.

⁴² Although it should be noted that the regular contingent was down to 15,000 men, too few to garrison 300 million in the event of a major insurrection.

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widespread fighting inside Persia, Afghanistan was curiously quiet. In Mesopotamia and East Africa there had been significant defeats and evidence of poor performance, including the lacklustre actions of the Indian cavalry near Ctesiphon, but overall, despite the British authorities' anxiety that there would be widespread disaffection, desertion or even mutiny, the Indian Army remained cohesive.

In France and Flanders there had been a handful of desertions by Muslim soldiers but never to the extent that some British officers had feared and the cases were usually related to the appalling conditions of the fighting front. Some deterioration of performance was to be expected in subsequent deployments when one considers that the forces being despatched overseas at short notice were far in excess of what the pre-war planners had prepared for. On the Western Front morale had been an issue but this is hardly surprising given the casualties and winter conditions in which the sepoy and sowars served. It is surely more remarkable that their spirit of cohesion and the quality of the leadership enabled the Indian Corps to remain intact under such stresses. While almost units fought well, making use of frontier warfare training and experience, there were exceptions. The 9th Bhopal Regiment tried to cross No Man's Land at Neuve Chappelle by crawling under German fire but their slow rate of movement exposed them to heavy casualties and there had been no attempt to co-ordinate fire and movement tactics, although the battalion redeemed itself with a fighting withdrawal.⁴³ By contrast, the 2/3rd Gurkhas utilised the tactics they had learned in clearing sangars at Dargai on the North West Frontier in 1898 to assault buildings in Neuve Chappelle. Their skirmishing tactics enabled them to co-ordinate movements and covering fire and clear machine-gun posts which would otherwise have pinned down the entire brigade.⁴⁴ The verdict on the performance of the Indian Corps is therefore a mixture of success and setback.

It was understandable that, during and after the war, Indian Army officers would emphasise the excellent examples of courage and determination shown by Indian units and their soldiers.⁴⁵ Critics would place greater significance on the incidence of self-inflicted wounds to show that Indian troops' morale made them unsuitable for the European theatre. Champions and critics alike had their agendas.⁴⁶ In recent years these have been replaced with new historiographical trends. There have been efforts to show that the Indian Army was merely an issue of race and coercion, apparently representing the organising principles of the British Empire. The problem with this interpretation is it was clearly not the way the soldiers and officers of the

⁴³ Corrigan, *Sepoys in the Trenches*, p. 71.

⁴⁴ Morton-Jack, *Indian Army on the Western Front*, p. 231.

⁴⁵ Willcocks, *With the Indians in France*, p. 9.

⁴⁶ See Morton-Jack, *The Indian Army on the Western Front*, p. 13; Merewether and Smith, *The Indian Corps in France*, pp. vii, chaps. 2 and 14.

Indian Army saw it themselves at the time.⁴⁷ They were organised primarily as an army, with a distinct cultural emphasis that could and often did generate fierce loyalty, competitiveness and *esprit de corps*. However, it was an army built around certain assumptions about the character of the war they would be called upon to fight. No one could have foreseen the demands that were to be placed upon it, and we should remember that the Indian Army was pitched hastily into a conflict without the luxury of preparation in order to hold the line in France, replace shattered divisions or secure vulnerable parts of the empire. Crucially, it had insufficient numbers of qualified young officers or experienced Indian officers to replace the casualties it suffered. Although largely withdrawn from France and Flanders, from 1917 the Indian Army that took the offensive in Palestine, Mesopotamia, and Africa was a significantly different organisation from that in 1914. Better equipped, seasoned, expanded, with better staffs, intelligence, logistics and *materiel*, it would go on to provide a great contribution to Allied victory in all these theatres.

⁴⁷ See 'Introduction' in Rob Johnson (ed), *The Indian Army: Virtue and Necessity* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2014).