

**Imagining the Imperial Community:
Wartime and Postcolonial Representations of the
British Women's Military Services in India and the Middle East, 1942–1945**

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During the Second World War, women's branches of the British military were established in India and the Middle East. This paper considers how representations of the overseas women's services—and the English and local servicewomen who were employed in “auxiliary” duties ranging from clerical to medical—participated in Britain's late-imperial project. Drawing on newsreel footage, print journalism, and records of recruiting parades (all accessed at the British National Archives and Imperial War Museum), it argues that representations of the Indian and Middle Eastern women's services erased the gendered and racial power dynamics that underpinned servicewomen's lived realities. Instead, the British media foregrounded multiculturalism in the name of political stability and British self-understanding as a benevolent and inclusive imperial power. Moreover, two turn-of-the-century history education projects that have attempted to restore colonial women's wartime service to collective memory have instead perpetuated this flawed process of “imperial inclusion” via simultaneous erasure, tokenization, and othering.¹

While some wartime representations of the overseas women's services (newsreels in particular) relied on Orientalist imagery of British privilege abroad, others portrayed non-white colonial women incorporated into inclusive imperial spaces. That these two opposing visions of the imperial community were simultaneously disseminated is indicative of a deep-seated tension in British self-understanding. As Sonya Rose has argued, Britain sought to maintain an “image of itself as a particular kind of imperial power”—that is, benevolent and inclusive—despite the fact that empire was persistently understood in terms of racial stratification. As such, wartime “British propaganda efforts attempted to deny, mask, or circumvent the power relations that were at the heart of both race and empire.”² Indeed, by examining depictions of the overseas women's services, we find that while local recruitment was initiated to resolve labor shortages, it had, by the end of the war, evolved into a propagandistic reaction to rising anti-colonial tensions in India and with the Jewish community in Palestine. Expanding the gendered and racial parameters of “Britishness” was, Whitehall realized, necessary for imperial survival.

At the turn of the century, colonial women's wartime service was subjected to a limited process of collective remembering. Two history education projects (a 1995 Imperial War Museum multimedia resource pack and a 2000 Ministry of Defense photographic exhibition) sought to recast the imperial past of colonial military service as a foundation for 21st century multicultural British identity. Both postcolonial narratives of multiculturalism were predicated—like their wartime equivalents—on simultaneous erasure, tokenization, and othering in the name of benevolent, inclusive whiteness. Indeed, both multimedia resource pack and photographic exhibition elucidate how the imperial past, and therefore imperial power itself, continue to be negotiated in our postcolonial moment. Instead of practicing historical inclusivity in order to foster a contemporary multicultural identity that implicitly perpetuates “othered” difference and normative whiteness, we must investigate the dynamics by which the boundaries of imperial belonging were constructed, imperial subjectivity fostered, and imperial power understood by both colonizer and colonized. This can be achieved by reading the archive “against the grain” to focus on the subaltern, as well as by reading “along the archival grain” to shed light on the tenuous and continually negotiated nature of colonial governance.³

¹ This paper is based on my undergraduate thesis, “Engendering Empire: The British Women's Military Services in India and the Middle East, 1939–1945,” which considers the establishment, experience, representation, and memory of the overseas women's services.

² Sonya O. Rose, *Which People's War?: National Identity and Citizenship in Britain, 1939–1945* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), 241, 280.

³ See Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2009).