Experiences of colonial troops

Dr Santanu Das gives an overview of the numbers and roles of colonial troops in World War One. Where did colonial troops serve and how was 'race' used as a factor in military policy?

Even by conservative estimates well over four million non-white men were mobilised into the European and American armies during the First World War, in combatant and non-combatant roles. What do we know about the daily lived war experiences of these men from former colonies and from different racial and ethnic groups? In spite of important work being done and the recent ‘global turn’ in First World War studies, the social and cultural history of the war still continues to maintain a neat symmetry to the war itself: the non-European aspects, like the non-European sites of battle, remain ‘sideshows’. The contours of the ‘Great War and modern memory’ start to look different if, instead of the writings of an ordinary European solider, let alone a poet like Wilfred Owen or a novelist like Erich Maria Remarque, we consider the memories of an Indian sepoy, a Chinese worker or an African askari.

A 'world' war

In 1906, in a fictional narrative, the German writer F H Grautoff warned that ‘a war in Europe… must necessarily set the whole world ablaze’. This was no Eurocentric boast. In 1914, the whole of Africa, except Ethiopia and Liberia, was under European rule and Great Britain and France controlled the two largest colonial empires. They would draw on them extensively during the war for both human and material resources.

Among the various colonies of the British empire, India contributed the largest number of men, with approximately 1.5 million recruited during the war up to December 1919. The dominions (self-governing nations within the British Commonwealth) – including Canada, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and Newfoundland – contributed a further 1.3 million men. New Zealand’s

mobilisation of more than 100,000 men may seem relatively small compared to India's, but in proportionate terms New Zealand made one of the largest contributions to the British empire, with five percent of its men aged 15-49 killed. Indian and New Zealand troops fought together in Gallipoli, where out of a total of 3000 Indian combatants, some 1624 were killed, a loss rate of more than 50 per cent.

In addition to the 90,000 troupes indigènes already under arms when the war started, France recruited between 1914 and 1918 nearly 500,000 colonial troops, including 166,000 West Africans, 46,000 Madagascans, 50,000 Indochinese, 140,000 Algerians, 47,000 Tunisians and 24,300 Moroccans. Most of these French colonial troops served in Europe. However, the majority of the Africans served as labourers or carriers in Africa. In total, as Hew Strachan has noted, over 2 million Africans were involved in the conflict as soldiers or labourers; 10 percent of them died, and among the labourers serving in Africa, the death rates may have been as high as 20 percent. Additionally, nearly 140,000 Chinese contract labourers were hired by the British and French governments, forming a substantial part of the immigrant labour force working in France during the war.

With the entry of the United States into the war, nearly 400,000 African-American troops were inducted into the US forces, of whom 200,000 served in Europe.

Race and military policy

According to one native South African labourer, the most remarkable part of his war experience was 'to see the different kinds of human races from all parts of the world'. This racial diversity on European soil was largely the result of French and British decisions to employ colonial non-white troops against Germany on the Western Front. Yet this decision was not straight forward in societies embedded with colour prejudices and doctrines of racial hierarchy - colour largely determined the life of the combatant and non-combatant in Europe. While France, with its assimilationist model,

deployed these troops in Europe, a similar decision for Great Britain caused more soul-searching. The Times History of the World revealed contemporary thinking on the issue when in 1914 it wrote, ‘The instinct which made us such sticklers for propriety in all our dealings made us more reluctant than other nations would feel to employ coloured troops against a white enemy.’

The British had regularly used colonial troops for imperial defence, but not in Europe or against other white races. Indian troops were not allowed to fight in the Boer War in South Africa (1899 – 1902). If a ‘coloured’ man were trained to raise arms against another European, what guarantee was there, so the racial thinking went, that he would not one day attack his own white master? However, after heavy casualties were suffered by the British Expeditionary Force in August 1914, two Indian divisions were diverted to France. Among the colonial non-white troops of the British empire, only Indians were allowed to fight in Europe. This was predominantly due to racial categorisation in British military policy.

Racial categorisation, in the context of war, assumed one of its most sinister forms in the theory of ‘martial races’. Both England and France divided their subject people into ‘warlike’ and ‘non-warlike’ races, into races guerrières and races non-guerrières. For British military recruitment, this meant that some ‘races’ from Nepal and the North Indian provinces – particularly Punjab – were more likely to be recruited to fight as they were considered inherently more ‘manly’ and warlike than men from other parts of India. Racial theory was similarly important to the French General - Charles Mangin, and his theory of ‘La force noire’: the creation of a large reserve of African troops to counter France’s demographic imbalance in the face of Germany. To him, West Africans were ‘natural warriors’, ‘primitives… whose young blood flows so ardently, as if avid to be shed’. But it was not only Africans in combatant roles that suffered. There has been important work on the use of carrier corps in sub-Saharan Africa, where men were reduced to ‘beasts of burden’ and suffered very high casualty rates (as high as twenty percent), often from disease and malnutrition. Many other ethnic

groups were also used as labourers in the various theatres of war. In recent years, there has been some interest, including an exhibition, on the approximately 140,000 Chinese workers who were hired by the British and French governments to clear WWI battlefields.

For the different dominions, colonies and racial groups around the globe, the war experience was profoundly transformative at different levels. What are often considered sideshows in the grand European narrative of the war were momentous events with enduring consequences for the local communities. Nor, for many of these groups, did the war – at the basic, physical level – end with the Armistice. For two weeks after the guns fell silent on the Western Front, the wily German commander General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck carried on his campaign in East Africa. In Europe, Chinese labourers started clearing up the battlefields of the Western Front, and French African troops stationed in the Ruhr region until early 1921 became the target of vicious racist propaganda.

While in popular memory, the perception of the First World War remains narrowly confined to the Western Front, First World War fighting took place in Europe, Africa and the Middle East, with brief excursions into Central Asia and the Far East. The litany of the names of different theatres of battle often becomes the marker for the ‘world’ nature of the First World War. The colonial homefront – the lives of hundreds of thousands of women and children in villages across Asia and Africa who lost their husbands, brothers or fathers, and faced different kinds of hardships – remains one of the most silent and under-researched areas in First World War history. Part of the problem is one of sources: many of these people were non-literate and have not left us with the diaries and memoirs that we have in Europe. However, the global reverberations of this ‘world war’ become apparent when we consider the experiences of people, both men and women, combatants and non-combatants, from around the world who fought or laboured or whose lives were changed forever because of the war.

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