

BOOK REVIEW

Soldiers of Empire: Indian and British Armies in World War II by Tarak Barkawi, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2017. xvii+ 321pp. ISBN978-1316620656.

There are contending theories to explain why, despite being racially discriminated, a large number of Indian soldiers remained loyal to their British masters during the Second World War (1939-1942). However, soon after the end of the Second World War a number of soldiers extended their support to the then ongoing freedom movement in India. They raised their voice against the multiple discriminations practiced against them by the British. For example, in 1946 Indian soldiers from the Royal Indian Navy mutinied against their superiors. In this book Tarak Barkawi talks about how the British trained the Indian soldiers who remain loyal and won the Second World War for them.

The loyalty of the Indian soldiers was not new for the British. In 1857 during the rebellion from some of the sepoys (soldiers) supported by the Indian rulers under the leadership of frailer old last ruler of Mughal dynasty, Bhadur Shah Zafar, the East India Company was assisted by the Indian soldiers from friendly princely states. In 1858 after the British Crown took over the administration from the East India Company, new policies were adopted to recruit the Indians in the military. The communities were divided between the “martial” and “non-martial” races: Those who helped the British in crushing the 1857 rebellion were termed as the “martial races” while the rebellions were categorised as “non-martial races”. About it, Barkawi writes that “the stereotypes of the martial races were constructed and realized through disciplinary power, shaping “recruits in the manner of self-fulfilling prophecy” (p 27). To retain such feeling the British also invoked religious and caste sentiments of the soldiers.

During the war the traditional recruitment policy was re-written, and many young people from the “non-martial” ethnic groups were recruited to raise the number of soldiers from about 160,000 to approximately two million. At many places people also joined the British Army to overcome poverty while at some places male teenagers were forced to join the British forces¹. As a result, unlike earlier, ethnically mixed companies called as “chapati company” were formed in many battalions (p 52). This social mix up was not welcomed by a number of Indian soldiers who now could not boast their racial and caste supremacy over the “non-martial race”.

Unlike, the First World War (1914-1919) during the Second World War a large number of Indians were politically trained to participate in the anti-colonial movements. Amidst the Second World War, in 1942 the Indian National Congress launched Quit India movement, and also Indian National Army (INA) was formed by Captain Mohan Singh, later taken over by Subhas Chandra Bose to fight against the British for independence of India. Soldiers had varied opinions on such political developments. Many of them criticised the Quit India movement because it inflicted hardships on their respective families lives while some infused with a sense of patriotism defected to the INA to fight against the British rule in India (p 87). The INA also had Prisoners of War (PoWs) handed over by the Japanese to Mohan Singh to fight against the British for India’s independence. However, as Barkawi maintains that many of them ended up in the Japanese prison and labour camps, and died there (p 114).

Part II of this book discusses the happenings at the war theatres in Burma (now Myanmar) and importance of discipline among the soldiers from different cultural backgrounds and countries (p 125).

Barkawi talks about the fight in Arakan region in Burma where due to a lack of experience and training in the jungle warfare a number of Indian soldiers lost their lives (p 131). Besides the British fighting the Japanese forces they had to also stop the INA which was making advance to fight against the British and free India. The British

¹ See Raghavan, Srinath (2016), *India’s War: The Making of Modern South Asia, 1939-1945*, Gurgaon: Penguin, and Yasmin, Khan (2015), *The Raj at War: A People’s History of India’s Second World War*. London: Vintage.

suspected that a number of INA soldiers in Myanmar penetrated into the British Army camps and encouraged the Indian soldiers to rebel against them (p 138). A few of the Indian soldiers from the British camps did defect to the INA camp (p 142).

Theoretically, looking into the sociological aspects of the Second World War, Barkawi talks about the importance of drill, rituals and sacrifice. He has discussed the theories of Du Picq, Durkheim and neo-Durkheimians to highlight the importance of the military practices. War does not symbolize individual valours, but it is also about the values, cultural traits and norms one deeply ingrained. Soldiers from different societies have different goals to achieve through war, and so definition of valour and sacrifice differs from one to another (p 193). The author has discussed the battle at Sangshak and some other engagements in the initial stages of the Japanese U-Go offensive at Kohima and Imphal in India (cited 204).

Part III of the book is on the representation of combat and cosmopolitan military histories and sociologies. As soldiers have to kill others to survive in the battlefield and win wars, it cannot be done without constructing a myth of self-greatness and hatred for the enemy. Most of these constructions are indoctrinated during the training or at war schools. Also, rumours are spread to denigrate the enemy. Likewise, during the Second World War “propogandists invented conflicts between Indian cultural and religious practices and those of the Japanese. Hindu soldiers were told that the Japanese were cruel to cattle and that they desecrated temples. Variations included Sikh PoWs being forced to shave their beards and cut their hair or Hindu or Muslim troops being forced to handle or eat beef or pork respectively” (p 235). However, a report on British infantry in India noted that “[b]efore the sudden entry of Japan into the war the average British soldier knew little or nothing of the Japanese” (Cited p 236).

Like all other wars, during the Second World War too, survival, self-interest, and relative comfort were likely motives of soldiers for their moves from surrender, to Japanese service, to British service again (p 256). But there were some who preferred to die instead of falling into the service of the enemy or taken as a PoWs. Scale of hurting or violence against the self was more prevalent among the Japanese soldiers. Majority number of Japanese soldiers refused to surrender instead they prefer a repeated costly frontal assaults-the banzi charge. Among the Japanese soldiers there was an “extreme veneration of death”, and a “cult of oblivion” in which to die in battle was an honour to the family and a transcendent act on the part of the individual. This was looked by many Allied soldiers as an evidence of Japanese courage but also of their rigidity and stupidity (cited 260).

Well Barkawai has talked about discipline and training of Indian soldiers by the British, he has missed to look into the details of about discriminations met by the Indian officers by their British counterparts. By the time Second World War started a number of Indians were commissioned into the British Indian Army. They were trained in Britain and in India but faced discrimination from their white colleagues. Second, although, as Barkawi has talked, the British were able to instill discipline among the Indian soldiers, there are examples when soldiers refused to obey the orders. For example, the Garhwal Rifles soldiers disobeyed to fire at Indian protestors during the non-cooperation movement.

This book by Tarak Barkawi is a well-researched sociological study on the role of the Indian soldiers during the Second World. It has, comprehensively, tried to look into some of the harsh realities of the Second World War where many soldiers sacrificed their lives fighting for one or the parties at the war.

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