

# The Sepoy Speaks: Discursively Imagining the Indian Soldier on World War I's Western Front

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## Abstract

This article focuses on the archive of letters written by Indian soldiers on the Western Front of World War I and collected by the British censor of Indian mail, Evelyn Howell. I place these letters in the context of how these Indian soldiers were imagined by the West as martial races during the war. Martial race discourse relied on the expert knowledge of British military officers in India, who claimed total authority over the subject of Indian soldiers with next to no reliance on actual Indian testimony. These censored letters are one of the only surviving bodies of testimony from the largely illiterate men of the Indian army of the colonial era. By evaluating the layers of mediation upon sepoy testimony that produced the archive of censor reports, I show the emotive complexity that underlay martial race discourse's simplified tropes of unthinking colonial loyalty.

## Introduction

From the heartland of Europe, the violence of the World War I rippled out through a network of imperial possessions and alliances. Growing scholarly interest in the global impact of the war has seen the consideration of WWI as beyond the Western European experience and the stereotypical image of static trenches on the Western Front.<sup>1</sup> The Centenary of the War has inspired a range of academic literature (within which this article itself is situated) on the deployment of colonial soldiers and labourers to Europe, with the war reimagined as a as “a turning point in the history of cultural encounter and

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<sup>1</sup> Heike Liebau et al., eds., *The World in World Wars: Experiences, Perceptions and Perspectives from Africa and Asia*, Studies in Global Social History, v. 5 (Leiden, The Netherlands ; Boston: Brill, 2010).

entanglements” due to the novelty of so many non-white men from the colonies encountering Europeans through “transcontinental military migration.”<sup>2</sup> Interest in the war as a ‘contact zone’ of colonial migration also animates contemporary European remembrances of the war, where the memory of the colonial soldier is resuscitated to negotiate the place of postcolonial migrant populations living within modern European states.<sup>3</sup> No body of colonial soldiers on the Western Front looms larger in this modern discourse than the soldiers (sepoys)<sup>4</sup> of the Indian Army – an echo of the intensity of discourse that surrounded these sepoys at the time of the war itself.

In this article I argue that the ways in which the Indian sepoy was and is spoken about is through the construction and circulation of a range of imaginaries of the sepoy. The discourse surrounding the colonial Indian Army has always been characterized by other people’s desires and anxieties superimposed onto the sepoy. If, as Fairclough suggests, “discourse makes people, as well as people make discourse”<sup>5</sup> the sepoy is a subjective body constituted by the discourse of others and denied the opportunity to speak for himself due to accreting layers of silencing.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, I have argued elsewhere that the sepoy has only been imagined to ‘speak’ within a narrow corpus of ventriloquist British literature where his imagined voice conformed to certain dominant British discourses of racialized colonial loyalty.<sup>7</sup> Establishing the range of imaginaries that constructed the sepoy body on the Western Front as a one-dimensional figure, I explore

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<sup>2</sup> Santanu Das, *India, Empire, and First World War Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 31; Christian Koller, ‘The Recruitment of Colonial Troops in Africa and Asia and Their Deployment in Europe during the First World War’, *Immigrants & Minorities* 26, no. 1–2 (March 2008): 114, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619280802442639>.

<sup>3</sup> Max Cohen, ‘Militarisation, Memorialisation & Multiculture: Muslims and the 2014 Centenary Commemorations of World War One in Britain’, *Contemporary Voices: St Andrews Journal of International Relations* 1, no. 1 (3 May 2018): 50, <https://doi.org/10.15664/jtr.1466>.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Sepoy’ was the lowest Indian Army infantry rank, with ‘sowar’ as the cavalry equivalent. I use the term ‘sepoy’ broadly to refer to soldiers of the Indian Army.

<sup>5</sup> Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*, Language in Social Life Series (London ; New York: Longman, 1995), 39.

<sup>6</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, Communications and Culture (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> Zoheb Mashur, “A Very Entertaining Book”: The Ventriloquism of Rudyard Kipling’s *The Eyes of Asia*, *Litteraria Pragensia: Studies in Literature and Culture*, no. 61 (2021): 80–99.

the difficulties of locating the sepoy's own discourse within the paucity of Indian wartime testimony that has survived. I present reports compiled by the censors of Indian mail to argue that within this archive of imperial surveillance and control we may paradoxically find not *the* sepoy voice, but rather a range of voices that speak to the heterogeneity beating within what Santanu Das called 'the sepoy heart'.<sup>8</sup>

## Imagining the Sepoy

During World War I, from September 1914 to December, 1919, 140,000 soldiers and labourers of the Indian Army served on the Western Front.<sup>9</sup> Arriving in late September 1914, the Indians played a crucial role in reinforcing the beleaguered British Expeditionary Forces on the Western Front through to December 1915, after which it was despatched to fight the Ottomans in Mesopotamia, leaving only its cavalry elements behind.<sup>10</sup> These cavalrymen were largely kept in reserve, and in early 1918 they were transferred to the Palestine Front, ending the presence of Indian troops in Europe.<sup>11</sup> These Indians were the only colonial force the British used in active combat in Europe, and it was the first time that the British had allowed a body of non-white men to meet white men in battle.<sup>12</sup>

The Indian Army is further notable for its prominence in British and French, cultural representation and propaganda during the war years and especially upon its first moment of arrival. From the moment of their landing in Marseilles the Indian Army was pursued by what Santanu Das wonderfully called "the imperial paparazzi."<sup>13</sup> The British

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<sup>8</sup> Santanu Das, 'Indian Sepoy Experience in Europe, 1914-18: Archive, Language, and Feeling', *Twentieth Century British History* 25, no. 3 (1 September 2014): 398, <https://doi.org/10.1093/tcbh/hwu033>.

<sup>9</sup> The War Office, *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire during the Great War. 1914-1920* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1922), 777.

<sup>10</sup> George Morton-Jack, *The Indian Army on the Western Front: India's Expeditionary Force to France and Belgium in the First World War*, ed. Hew Strachan and Geoffrey Wawro, Cambridge Military Histories (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 7.

<sup>11</sup> David Omissi, ed., *Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldiers' Letters, 1914-18*, Studies in Military and Strategic History (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire : New York: Mamillan Press, 1999), 4; Meanwhile, Indian labourers stayed on even into the post-war reconstruction years. See: Dominiek Dendooven, 'Living Apart Together: Belgian Civilians and Non-White Troops and Workers in Wartime Flanders', in *Race, Empire and First World War Writing*, ed. Das Santanu (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 152.

<sup>12</sup> Das, *India, Empire, and First World War Culture*, 205.

<sup>13</sup> Das, 126.

and the French made extensive use of colonial military labour in Europe during the War<sup>14</sup> but no body of non-white men in Europe excited as much excitement and interest as the Indians.<sup>15</sup> The discursive richness engendered by the encounter of Europeans with Indians was, as Roly Grimshaw of the Poona Horse put it, “a great deal of gush, also bosh.”<sup>16</sup>

### Fighting for Izzat

When the first Indians arrived in Marseilles in September 1914, they were greeted with fanfare by a French population who had had no advance notice of their arrival and were taken aback by the sight of “gallant, bronze-faced soldiers who marched by with dignified yet swinging gait, and smiled with a flash of dazzling teeth when people threw them flowers and children gave them flags.”<sup>17</sup> This image of jaunty, racially spectacular warriors also excited British reportage, with the *Illustrated London News* calling them “high-souled men of first-rate training and representing an ancient civilization.”<sup>18</sup> Readers of the *ILN* were offered the spectacle of these colonial soldiers dressed in ceremonial garb, marked out by their distinctive headdresses and facial hair, pennants on lances fluttering as the cavalry charged. In a wealth of wartime media representation (in books, newspaper articles, illustrations, film, etc.), the sepoy reappears as a body whose signifiers were long made almost memetic in European culture through *earlier* representations in media spanning decades across “manuals and journals to paintings, postcards and cartoons, to

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<sup>14</sup> For overviews of the scale of non-white labour on the Western Front, see Koller, ‘The Recruitment of Colonial Troops in Africa and Asia and Their Deployment in Europe during the First World War’; Barton C. Hacker, ‘White Man’s War, Coloured Man’s Labour. Working for the British Army on the Western Front’, *Itinerario* 38, no. 03 (December 2014): 27–44, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0165115314000515>; for an analysis of Indian civilian labour on the Western Front, see Radhika Singha, ‘The Short Career of the Indian Labour Corps in France, 1917–1919’, *International Labor and Working-Class History* 87 (2015): 27–62, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S014754791500006X>.

<sup>15</sup> Shrabani Basu, ‘Turbans in the Trenches: Indian Sepoys and Sowars on the Western Front during the Great War’, in *Indian Soldiers in the First World War: Re-Visiting a Global Conflict*, ed. Ashutosh Kumar and Claude Markovits, 1st ed. (Routledge India, 2020), 11, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003142362>; Das, *India, Empire, and First World War Culture*, 39.

<sup>16</sup> Roly Grimshaw, ‘Experiences of Ram Singh, Dafadar of Horse: An Echo of 1914’, in *Indian Cavalry Officer 1914-15*, ed. J. H. Wakefield and C. J. M. Weippert (Kent: D. J. Costello, 1986), 98.

<sup>17</sup> Massia Bibikoff, *Our Indians at Marseilles*, trans. Leonard Huxley (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1915), 11.

<sup>18</sup> ‘To Fight Side by Side with the British in France: Indian Troops.’, *Illustrated London News*, 5 September 1914.

advertisements for boot-polish.”<sup>19</sup> These signifiers were visual: the horses and the pennants and lances, “the Gurkha with his kukri and the Sikh with his whiskers and turban,”<sup>20</sup> and they were also textual. The sepoy was a figure understood as fighting for reasons of honour and chivalry. The images offered to the readers of the *ILN* reproduced a narrative of there still existing in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century men who lived their lives according to medieval codes of honour, whose loyalty was directed towards the service of the Empire and the British people. The relationship with colonial India at this time itself seemed to be based on such codes of honour. Pledges of loyalty by India’s politicians, aristocrats and vernacular press caused a stir in Britain; John Buchan, in his *History of the War* (1920) recorded the feeling in the imperial metropole: “...It was the performance of India which took the world by surprise and thrilled every British heart... The British Empire had revealed itself as... a union based not on statute and officialdom but upon the eternal simplicities of the human heart.”<sup>21</sup> Consistently, Indians were described as men who fought out of a deep and abiding sense of duty.

The innate loyalty of the Indian soldier rose magnificently to the occasion; all willingly and cheerfully left their homes and country – not because they were assured of the righteousness of the cause for which they were to risk their lives, but because the Sirdar (Government) had ordered it and because their own British officers considered the cause a just one, participation in which would advance the name of their regiment.<sup>22</sup>

It stretches credulity to imagine Indian soldiers “willingly and cheerfully” crossing oceans to fight for their colonial masters in a war they had no stake in. WWI was famously communicated as an insensible, futile event through the writings of British war

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<sup>19</sup> Das, *India, Empire, and First World War Culture*, 125. Das also offers in this book an excellent overview of the sepoy’s presence across wartime culture in Europe and India.

<sup>20</sup> Das, 125.

<sup>21</sup> John Buchan, *A History of the Great War* (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1922) as quoted in Philip Mason, *A Matter of Honour: An Account of the Indian Army, Its Officers and Men* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 409.

<sup>22</sup> Roly Grimshaw, *Indian Cavalry Officer 1914-15*, ed. J. H. Wakefield and C. J. M. Weippert (Kent: D. J. Costello, 1986), 10.

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poets.<sup>23</sup> Europeans who joined the belligerent armies got a radically different war to what they were expecting,<sup>24</sup> and capacity for European soldiers to have consented to the war has been called into question in modern historiography.<sup>25</sup> If the industrialized violence of the war exerted such a psychological toll on European soldiers, is it defensible to suggest that sepoys from India consented to the ordeal? On the other hand, there exist established tropes regarding the nature of the colonial Indian army as an institution bound in loyalty to the British Raj, whose men fought in service of their duty to white ‘sahibs’ and for ‘izzat’. Izzat is a concept often translated to mean “respect, respectability, honour”,<sup>26</sup> or “honour, standing, reputation or prestige.”<sup>27</sup> Sepoys who fought in WWI have been understood to have fought for izzat, or other concepts such as “dharm and shaheed/shahadat” – which translate roughly to ‘faith’ and ‘martyrdom’ – or through obligation from having ‘eaten the salt’ of the British Raj or the King-Emperor himself.<sup>28</sup> Concepts such as izzat has been criticized by Ravi Ahuja for being repeated ad nauseum as explanations of sepoy motivations that avoid complexity in favour of “a rather impoverished as well as static idea of ‘honour’... assumed to have controlled the Indian sepoy troops in each of their movements like an army of so many string puppets.”<sup>29</sup> ‘Izzat’ and ‘salt’ are not only difficult to move past because the tropes have entrenched

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<sup>23</sup> Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 25th anniversary ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>24</sup> Niall Ferguson and Paul Kennedy, ‘War Origins’, in *The Legacy of the Great War: Ninety Years On*, ed. J. M. Winter (Columbia : Kansas City, Mo: University of Missouri Press ; National World War I Museum, 2009), 44.

<sup>25</sup> Jay Winter summed it up with the conundrum: “Can a soldier consent to a war in which the greatest concentration of artillery fire in history was arrayed against him?” John Horne and Len Smith, ‘The Soldiers’ War: Coercion or Consent’, in *The Legacy of the Great War: Ninety Years On*, ed. J. M. Winter (Columbia : Kansas City, Mo: University of Missouri Press ; National World War I Museum, 2009), 92.

<sup>26</sup> Ravi Ahuja, ‘Corrosiveness of Comparison: Reverberations of Indian Wartime Experiences in German Prison Camps (1915-1919)’, in *The World in World Wars: Experiences, Perceptions and Perspectives from Africa and Asia*, ed. Heike Liebau et al., Studies in Global Social History, v. 5 (Leiden, The Netherlands ; Boston: Brill, 2010), 134.

<sup>27</sup> Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*, 12.

<sup>28</sup> Gajendra Singh, *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars: Between Self and Sepoy*, War, Culture and Society, 2014, 68.

<sup>29</sup> Ahuja, ‘Corrosiveness of Comparison: Reverberations of Indian Wartime Experiences in German Prison Camps (1915-1919)’, 134.

themselves, but because sepoys in British officers' memoirs are reported to use such rhetoric and in their own testimony attest to the importance of these values.<sup>30</sup>

Izzat obscures very real financial and status motivations for joining the ranks (the Indian Army, unlike the British, never implemented conscription),<sup>31</sup> but something more than a mercenary motivation moved the sepoys in Europe to fight despite horrendous casualties, earning “literally hundreds of citations for honours” and multiple Victoria Crosses.<sup>32</sup> The Indian Army is understood to have had a genuine attachment to their colonial masters, with sepoys seeing their officers as surrogate parents,<sup>33</sup> and of having had no attachments to the nationalist movements simmering in India.<sup>34</sup> Thus, after the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre at Amritsar in 1919, Gandhi could declare, “the sepoy has been used more often as a hired assassin than as a soldier defending the liberty or the honour of the weak and the helpless.”<sup>35</sup> The sepoy became forgotten in India as an uncomfortable reminder of colonial complicity after independence.<sup>36</sup>

However, Gandhi himself had been an active recruiter for the Indian Army during the war, promising to “rain men” on the British.<sup>37</sup> Gandhi, like many Indian nationalists, had hoped to leverage Indian war support into political concessions from the British Empire, which motivated professions of pro-Imperial loyalty even from India's more radical politicians and vernacular press.<sup>38</sup> Many Indians had hoped to use war service to resuscitate an Indian masculinity lost under colonial rule or to prove the brown man the

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<sup>30</sup> Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*, 12.

<sup>31</sup> Kaushik Roy, ‘Combat Motivations of the Sepoys and Sowards during the First World War’, in *Indian Soldiers in the First World War: Re-Visiting a Global Conflict*, ed. Ashutosh Kumar and Claude Markovits, 1st ed. (Routledge India, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003142362>.

<sup>32</sup> Mason, *A Matter of Honour*, 414.

<sup>33</sup> Jeffrey Greenhut, ‘Sahib and Sepoy: An Inquiry into the Relationship between the British Officers and Native Soldiers of the British Indian Army’, *Military Affairs* 48, no. 1 (1984): 15–18, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1988342>.

<sup>34</sup> Mason, *A Matter of Honour*, 425.

<sup>35</sup> Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, ‘Tampering with Loyalty’, *Young India*, 29 September 1921, 309–10.

<sup>36</sup> Thierry DI Costanzo, ‘Memory and History of the Great(Er) War and India: From a National-Imperial to a More Global Perspective’, *E-Rea*, no. 14.2 (15 June 2017): 9, <https://doi.org/10.4000/erea.5844>.

<sup>37</sup> Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, ‘Letter to J. L. Maffey, 30 April 1918’, in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. XIV (Ahmedabad: Government of India, 1965), 382.

<sup>38</sup> Das, *India, Empire, and First World War Culture*, 40.

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military equal of the white man, that even the sepoy could be awakened to nationalist consciousness by encountering liberal living conditions in Europe.<sup>39</sup> World War I represented the potential to turn this instrument of political oppression to the advantage of nationalism. Gandhi was among those who argued that the sepoy was disinterested in nationalism and would not agitate for self-rule on his own, but that he could instead be leveraged by India's intelligentsia. Even as the sepoys were to be instrumentalized into being a vector of Indian nationalism, it was clear to Gandhi that ideologically the sepoys' heart lay with the British: "They were not sent out by us, nor did they join up through patriotism. They know nothing of swaraj [self-rule]. At the end of the War they will not ask for it."<sup>40</sup>

## Colonial Fantasy

The trope of the sepoy as a colonial loyalist moved by 'izzat' is a discursive construct. A 'discourse' in this sense is a formation of statements that together interact to create the ways in which something can be understood while delineating the boundaries within which the topic can be constructed.<sup>41</sup> The dominant British discourse that constructed the sepoy was martial race discourse, which imagined that the men of the Indian Army were recruited from warlike, virile races who were chivalrous, heroic, and innately loyal to the British Empire.<sup>42</sup> By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century this discourse informed the recruiting policy of the armies of India, preventing the enrolment of the so-called 'non-martial' races.<sup>43</sup>

Codifying martial race discourse in colonial handbooks, British military ethnologists purported to assume total scientific knowledge on the fighting merits and recruitability of different Indian populations, who could be assigned and handled as

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<sup>39</sup> Das, chap. 1.

<sup>40</sup> Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, "Speech at Gujarat Political Conference - I", 3 November 1917', in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. XIV (Ahmedabad: Government of India, 1965), 55.

<sup>41</sup> Stuart Hall, 'The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power', in *Formations of Modernity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Bram Gieben, *Understanding Modern Societies: An Introduction 1* (Polity Press, 1992), 291.

<sup>42</sup> George Fletcher MacMunn, *The Martial Races of India* (London: Sampson, Low, Marston & Co., 1933), 355.

<sup>43</sup> Heather Streets, *Martial Races: The Military, Race and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture, 1857-1914* (Manchester University Press, 2004).



categories through the colonial expertise of the Victorian ‘men on the spot’.<sup>44</sup> Beliefs in ‘race science’, informed by Darwin’s evolutionary theories, Victorian understandings of caste, theories of a linguistic kinship between Indian and European languages through the Aryan peoples and theories of climactic degeneration came together in a discursive formation that advanced a racially deterministic argument for the recruitment of certain Indian populations favoured by the British. It also acted as a narrative of racial unfitness that excluded populations the British saw as rivals for political control from joining the military and potentially subverting the key instrument of colonial control in India.<sup>45</sup>

In 1914, all sepoys were drawn from these martial races, and so it was the martial races that fought on the Western Front. While ‘race’ is presented as a biological argument, Stuart Hall argued that it is a sociohistorical tool emerging from “the interplay between the representation of racial difference, the writing of power, and the production of knowledge.”<sup>46</sup> Martial race discourse thus responded to the manpower needs of the war by expanding the recruitable population of India to declare formerly non-martial races suddenly martial.<sup>47</sup> The seeming contradiction between the biological fixity of race and the practical realities of a shifting recruitment base were reflected in handbooks that were constantly being updated or disregarded. Yet the actual malleability of the discourse did not point to its weakness but rather its function as an exercise in colonial power: “they were intellectual justifications of colonialism and the colonial military that at once articulated supreme confidence and unseen fears.”<sup>48</sup> The discourse provided a recourse to claims of objective, scientific knowledge for the strategic choices and alliances of the

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<sup>44</sup> Amar Farooqui, “‘Divide and Rule’? Race, Military Recruitment and Society in Late Nineteenth Century Colonial India’, *Social Scientist* 43, no. 3/4 (April 2015): 12.

<sup>45</sup> Streets, *Martial Races: The Military, Race and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture, 1857–1914*; Mary Des Chene, ‘Military Ethnology in British India’, *South Asia Research* 19, no. 2 (October 1999): 121–35, <https://doi.org/10.1177/026272809901900202>.

<sup>46</sup> Sut Jhally, *Race: The Floating Signifier*, Featuring Stuart Hall, 1996, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PodKkigg2Pw&ab\\_channel=thepostarchive](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PodKkigg2Pw&ab_channel=thepostarchive).

<sup>47</sup> Kaushik Roy, ‘Race and Recruitment in the Indian Army: 1880–1918’, *Modern Asian Studies* 47, no. 4 (July 2013): 1346, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X12000431>.

<sup>48</sup> Singh, *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars: Between Self and Sepoy*, 33.

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colonial military,<sup>49</sup> while at the same time reassuring the British that they had the loyalty of the best of India's peoples, whose natures and motivations were never in doubt to anyone who had read the right handbook – a British officer could see “written on the foreheads” of his men all he needed to know.<sup>50</sup>

Heather Streets argued that this colonial discourse was constructed through a range of media representations in the mid-to-late 1800s, where British officers fighting alongside newly-raised regiments of Gurkha and Sikh soldiers against mutinous sepoys in 1857 made media British media darlings out of their native allies.<sup>51</sup> Sikhs and Gurkhas became memetic as loyal, chivalrous soldiers through their proximity to heroic British soldiers punishing the demonized body of the mutineers, who were constructed as cowardly, cruel and accused of committing outrages against British women and children.<sup>52</sup> Martial race discourse only became more prominent in the late 1800s, when Frederick Roberts, Commander-in-Chief in India, used his British media connections to urge the need to recruit only martial races in India to meet the potential threat of a Russian invasion through Central Asia.<sup>53</sup> By the time of WWI, Sikhs, Gurkhas and other martial races had become familiar to the British outside India through a range of representations from ““manuals and journals to paintings, postcards and cartoons, to advertisements for boot-polish.”<sup>54</sup> Martial race discourse was thus more than a technology of colonial military recruitment but also a British media discourse that celebrated the sepoy as a heroic loyalist. It assuaged imperial anxieties that were provoked by the deployment of sepoys on the Western Front; anxieties including the fear of colonial soldiers killing white, European enemies and what this would do to colonial

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<sup>49</sup> Gavin Rand, “Martial Races” and “Imperial Subjects”: Violence and Governance in Colonial India, 1857–1914’, *European Review of History: Revue Européenne d’histoire* 13, no. 1 (March 2006): 9, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13507480600586726>.

<sup>50</sup> Des Chene, ‘Military Ethnology in British India’, 135.

<sup>51</sup> Streets, *Martial Races: The Military, Race and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture, 1857–1914*.

<sup>52</sup> Nancy L Paxton, ‘Mobilizing Chivalry: Rape in British Novels about the Indian Uprising of 1857’, *Victorian Studies* 36, no. 1 (1992): 27.

<sup>53</sup> Frederick Sleight Roberts, *Correspondence with England While Commander-in-Chief in Madras, 1881–1885*, vol. 2, n.d., 25–26; Frederick Sleight Roberts, *Forty-One Years in India* (London: Richard Bentley, 1897), 441.

<sup>54</sup> Das, *India, Empire, and First World War Culture*, 125.

discipline,<sup>55</sup> the possibility of disloyalty among the sepoys in an era of growing Indian nationalism and the religious tension of using Muslim sepoys in a war into which the Ottoman Empire entered with a declaration of Jihad, and also racialized worries of sexual contact between violent non-white men and white women<sup>56</sup> – which even when understood to be consensual<sup>57</sup> could undermine imperial prestige and control in the colonies.<sup>58</sup> Martial race discourse imagined the Indian soldier as too loyal, too chivalrous for these fears to be borne out, and martial race media – especially literature that ventriloquized the sepoy voice to report “the discourse of the master”<sup>59</sup> – acted as “imperial antibiotic” that inoculated British anxieties.<sup>60</sup> The war performance of the Indian army was also rehabilitated through the discourse. The British Empire was not ready for the war, but the Indian Army was essentially a border security force and especially ill-adapted for modern warfare – its equipment was outdated, its tactics unsuited, and its men under the psychological pressure of being in an alien environment to which they were connected only by British officers – who were quickly dying. The Indian Army thus suffered tremendous casualties and morale problems, frequently breaking when their white officers were killed.<sup>61</sup> Martial race discourse imagined the sepoys as valuable military allies, unflinching under pressure. Even the anachronism of sepoys armed with lances and kukris in a war characterized by industrial violence on an

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<sup>55</sup> Koller, ‘The Recruitment of Colonial Troops in Africa and Asia and Their Deployment in Europe during the First World War’, 124. For an articulation of the fear of a brown or black man taught to fight and kill the white man, see E. D. Morel, *The Black Man’s Burden* (Manchester: The National Labour Press, Ltd., 1920).

<sup>56</sup> Singh, *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars: Between Self and Sepoy*, chap. 4.

<sup>57</sup> A common fear existed that painted the colonial soldier as a sexual predator. This racist discourse was more commonly applied to black soldiers and not Indians, most prominently in the international campaign of outrage in response to France’s use of African troops in the post-war occupation of the Rhineland. See John Boonstra, ‘Women’s Honour and the Black Shame: Coloured Frenchmen and Respectable Comportment in the Post-World War I Occupied Rhineland’, *German History* 33 (2015): 24; Iris Wigger, ‘“Black Shame” — the Campaign against “Racial Degeneration” and Female Degradation in Interwar Europe’, *Race & Class* 51, no. 3 (January 2010): 33–46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396809354444>.

<sup>58</sup> Samuel Hyson and Alan Lester, ‘“British India on Trial”: Brighton Military Hospitals and the Politics of Empire in World War I’, *Journal of Historical Geography* 38, no. 1 (January 2012): 18–34, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2011.09.002>; Philippa Levine, ‘Battle Colors: Race, Sex, and Colonial Soldierly in World War I’, *Journal of Women’s History* 9, no. 4 (1998): 104–30, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2010.0213>.

<sup>59</sup> Andrew Hill, ‘The BBC Empire Service: The Voice, the Discourse of the Master and Ventriloquism’, *South Asian Diaspora* 2, no. 1 (March 2010): 25–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19438190903541952>.

<sup>60</sup> Das, *India, Empire, and First World War Culture*, 180.

<sup>61</sup> Greenhut, ‘Sahib and Sepoy’.

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unprecedented scale was transformed into something heroic instead of evidence of the haste with which ill-equipped sepoys in France were thrown into the fire. Imagining colonial soldiers engaged in hand-to-hand combat allowed Europeans to vicariously live out fantasies of chivalrous warfare made impossible by artillery, barbed wire, and machine-guns.<sup>62</sup>

## Colonial Nightmare

While the discourse was a ‘colonial fantasy’ of loyalty at a moment of great stress placed on the imperial relationship, it was also a ‘colonial nightmare.’<sup>63</sup> To inoculate against imperial anxiety is also to acknowledge the demons lurking beneath an idealized image. Europeans who saw their countries physically transformed – “unhomed” – by the war saw the presence of the non-white soldier as metonymic of the alterity of industrial war itself.<sup>64</sup> The use of colonial soldiers inspired Max Weber to declare that Germany was in danger of being “ravaged” by “an army of Negroes, Ghurkhas and all barbaric mob of the world.”<sup>65</sup> Even positive depictions of sepoys carried racialized tension, juxtaposing Indian soldiers against the backdrop of European villages laid to waste,<sup>66</sup> or describing sepoys through animal motifs (“dripping tigers”<sup>67</sup> using their “catlike litheness” to “creep like wild beasts over any sort of ground and surprise the enemy”<sup>68</sup>). Martial race discourse navigated the “discursive tension” between depictions of sepoys as chivalrous loyalists and the racist undercurrents of a European view of colonials as violent primitives.<sup>69</sup> The same depictions of sepoys fighting with knives that acted as projections of a suppressed

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<sup>62</sup> Das, *India, Empire, and First World War Culture*, 145.

<sup>63</sup> Singh, *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars: Between Self and Sepoy*, 33.

<sup>64</sup> Claire Buck, *Conceiving Strangeness in British First World War Writing*, 2015, 19, <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=2057850>.

<sup>65</sup> Max Weber, quoted in Iris Wigger, *The ‘Black Horror on the Rhine’: Intersections of Race, Nation, Gender and Class in 1920s Germany* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2017), 2–3, <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-31861-9>.

<sup>66</sup> Maurice Barrés, ‘A Visit to the English Army: The Gurkhas and Sikhs’, in *Our Indians at Marseilles*, by Massia Bibikoff, trans. Leonard Huxley (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1915), 3.

<sup>67</sup> Barrés, 6.

<sup>68</sup> Bibikoff, *Our Indians at Marseilles*, 25.

<sup>69</sup> Das, *India, Empire, and First World War Culture*, 145.

European valour also reflected fears of European racial degeneration due to the barbarity into which the war had plunged Europe.

Inherent to the discourse in its roots in British India was a combination of admiration and contempt for the martial races. Rhetoric that simultaneously praised and mocked the martial races was par for the course in the discourse, with Sikhs considered “stolid and unimaginative”,<sup>70</sup> Gurkhas described as “sturdy little tykes”<sup>71</sup> and Hindu Brahmins considered overly finicky regarding caste requirements.<sup>72</sup> The British liked to imagine the martial races as essentially stupid, a stupidity that made them tractable and not a threat to a British rule, and gave the British a role to play as the nurturing parents of their men.<sup>73</sup> However, this ‘stupidity’ was engineered by a martial race policy that prevented the recruitment of educated, urbanized Indians – broadly labelled ‘unmartial’ and spoken of with disgust by martial race theorists.<sup>74</sup> The army was designed to apolitical and unaffected by Indian nationalism through this deliberately cultivated ignorance, and sepoys were recruited exclusively from rural and frontier provinces where the British military maintained a monopoly on economic power as employer and patron through public welfare programs such as the canal colonies of the Punjab. The British took great pains to keep their sepoys distanced from nationalist influence. The martial loyalist was most blatant as a construct, an imaginary, in the Punjab, home to most of martial races and whose population made up the bulk of the Indian Army – by the 20<sup>th</sup> century a source of nationalist ferment kept under strict military control, and eventual site of the Amritsar Massacre of 1919.<sup>75</sup> While, as previously stated, conscription was unknown in India during the war, recruitment in the Punjab was intensive enough to excite popular unrest, and the partnerships between the military bureaucracy and local

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<sup>70</sup> MacMunn, *The Martial Races of India*, 277.

<sup>71</sup> MacMunn, 195.

<sup>72</sup> Singh, *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars: Between Self and Sepoy*, 15.

<sup>73</sup> David Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj: The Indian Army, 1860-1914*, Studies in Military and Strategic History (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1994), 27.

<sup>74</sup> George Fletcher MacMunn, ‘The Romance of the Martial Races in India’, *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 80, no. 4128 (1 January 1932): 182.

<sup>75</sup> Tai Yong Tan, *The Garrison State: The Military, Government and Society in Colonial Punjab 1849-1947*, Sage Series in Modern Indian History 8 (Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage, 2005), chap. 3.

Indian leaders to maximize the manpower output of the province in the face of growing Indian casualties raise serious doubts as to the extent to which it can be said that the Indian Army, especially after 1914, was really a body of consenting men.<sup>76</sup>

Martial race discourse was thus a highly contingent product, a constantly shifting set of articulations that together entrenched an imagination of the Indian soldier as a colonial loyalist motivated by the simple, innate desire to fight for Izzat and for the Raj. It played a vital role in reassuring an imperial population that the Indian army could be relied upon to fight the Germans on the Western Front by defusing the racialized tensions sparked by this violent military encounter. Alternative imaginations of the sepoy have been advanced, such as their potential as nascent nationalists or German ethnologists' view of Muslim sepoys as religious fundamentalists who could be incited to rebel against the British as part of the Jihad called by the Ottoman Empire,<sup>77</sup> but the Indian Army on the Western Front never mutinied and performed its duty throughout. Even though martial race discourse is clearly a whitewashing of a complex reality of colonial subjectivity and complicity tested at a unique moment of imperial panic and anxiety, it seems vindicated. A crucial fact that allows the discourse to exert its hegemony over our imagination of the sepoy is that we lack sepoy testimony to contradict or trouble it. Martial race discourse's phobia of educated Indians resulted indirectly in the creation of an illiterate army that could leave behind nothing like the wealth of testimony created by British soldiers in World War I. Quoting Gail Braybon's observation that "more words have been written about the great British war poets than about all the non-white soldiers

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<sup>76</sup> Santanu Das, 'The Singing Subaltern', *Parallax* 17, no. 3 (August 2011): 6–7, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2011.584409>.

<sup>77</sup> Kris K. Manjappa, 'The Illusions of Encounter: Muslim "Minds" and Hindu Revolutionaries in First World War Germany and After', *Journal of Global History* 1, no. 3 (November 2006): 363–82, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022806003044>; Ahuja, 'Corrosiveness of Comparison: Reverberations of Indian Wartime Experiences in German Prison Camps (1915-1919)'.

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put together,”<sup>78</sup> Santanu Das reflected that the British poets also wrote more surviving words on the conflict than all the non-white troops put together.<sup>79</sup>

Given the paucity of sources, is it possible to discover something of the authentic sepoy voice? Can we glimpse the real thoughts, emotions and motivations animating the men underneath the colonial nightmare and fantasy? The silencing imposed upon the sepoy through martial race discourse is lately being countered by scholarship that seeks to discover and analyze forgotten sources of sepoy testimony. One of the principal such sources of sepoy speech can be found in letters written from the Western Front and collected by British censors.

## The Sepoy Speaks

### Mediation and Intervention in Censor Reports

In September 1914, “a member of the Indian Revolutionary party, if it may be so called, was arrested in Toulouse,” recalled Evelyn Berkeley Howell of the Indian Civil Service.<sup>80</sup> “Upon examination his pockets were found to be stuffed with seditious literature intended for dissemination amongst the Indian soldiery.” This arrest convinced the British military command to create a body of censors to screen the correspondence of sepoys on the Western Front. Howell was the first Head Censor of Indian Mail.<sup>81</sup>

Howell commanded a small team of censors that never numbered more than eight at the height of its duties. In 1914 their initial task initially was to monitor the incoming mail at the Indian Base Post Office at Boulogne, to check for seditious letters. Then Howell’s team began to monitor the outward mail of wounded sepoys recuperating

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<sup>78</sup> Gail Braybon, *Evidence, History and the Great War: Historians and the Impact of 1914-18* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2003), 28.

<sup>79</sup> Santanu Das, ‘Indian Sepoy Experience in Europe, 1914-18: Archive, Language, and Feeling’, *Twentieth Century British History* 25, no. 3 (1 September 2014): 393, <https://doi.org/10.1093/tcbh/hwu033>.

<sup>80</sup> Evelyn Berkeley Howell, ‘Report on Twelve Months’ Writing of the Indian Mail Censorship’, in *Reports of the Censor of Indian Mails in France, 1914-1918*, vol. 1, 1915; quoted in Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*, 369.

<sup>81</sup> Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*, 6.

in Britain, and by January 1915 they had expanded to the letters being sent by sepoys in general from France.<sup>82</sup> Targets for censorship included mentions of disaffection and the transmission of sensitive data, but in this respect the Indians' letters were subjected to the same scrutiny as white troops.<sup>83</sup> Specific to the sepoys' correspondence, the censors policed disparaging attitudes towards whites, and in particular references to sex with white women.<sup>84</sup> It was considered damaging to "the prestige and spirit of European rule in India" if the sepoys were allowed to conceive of a "wrong idea" of the *izzat* (honour) of European women.<sup>85</sup> As the war went on, it also became important to screen against references to self-mutilation to get out of war duty (a practice called malingering), and to stop hints sent from sepoy to sepoy on how best to hurt oneself effectively and surreptitiously.<sup>86</sup>

The censors had an onerous task. The Indian Army, for all that it lacked literacy, was not immune to the War's generative effect of a "sudden and irrepressible bulimia of letter-writing."<sup>87</sup> Through dictation to scribes, sepoys across France and the UK were producing 10,000-20,000 letters a week by March 1915.<sup>88</sup> Das informs us that sepoys posted in imperial service abroad had generally enjoyed the privilege of sending and receiving mail, but that there had been nothing before like the volume of correspondence generated during the war.<sup>89</sup> It was impossible for Howell's team to censor and screen all the letters: "deciphering and translating a single letter could take up to two hours even for the best-qualified censors."<sup>90</sup> The censor office was in fact meant to be a second site of censorship, with the first being at the regimental level. British officers of the regiments

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<sup>82</sup> Omissi, 6.

<sup>83</sup> Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 95.

<sup>84</sup> David Omissi, 'The Indian Army in Europe, 1914-1918', in *Colonial Soldiers in Europe, 1914-1945: 'Aliens in Uniform' in Wartime Societies*, ed. Eric Storm and Ali Al Tuma, Routledge Studies in Modern History (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 129.

<sup>85</sup> Evelyn Berkeley Howell, 'Censor's Report', 19 June 1915, EUR/MSS/F143/83.

<sup>86</sup> Singh, *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars: Between Self and Sepoy*, 98.

<sup>87</sup> Martin Lyons, *The Writing Culture of Ordinary People in Europe, c.1860-1920* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 77; quoted in Das, *India, Empire, and First World War Culture*, 206.

<sup>88</sup> Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*, 7.

<sup>89</sup> Das, *India, Empire, and First World War Culture*, 206-7.

<sup>90</sup> Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*, 7.



censored letters, often after having them read out by Indian officers; this regimental censorship was haphazard and decreased in efficiency as British officers with command of Indian languages began to die out over the course of the war. Indian officers took advantage of their positions as translators to slip their own dissident correspondence through.<sup>91</sup> By 1915, the regimental censorship had devolved into little more than a formality, a rubber-stamping of letters no one had time to screen.<sup>92</sup>

Due to the inefficiency at both levels of censorship, the primary function of the Indian Mail Censor became intelligence-gathering. Starting in December 1914, at a weekly (later fortnightly) basis Howell's team gathered about a hundred translated letters together into a budget of extracts from the correspondence, and sent these compilations along with reports on their contents to a range of interested parties: "the Secretary of State for India, the India Office, the War Office, the Foreign Office, Buckingham Palace, and to the commanders of the Indian divisions (among others)."<sup>93</sup> The translated letters included brief information regarding the caste and religion of the correspondents, their names and addresses, and the date and original languages. These reports were designed to gauge the morale of the Indian army and to pinpoint actionable grievances such as a lack of Qurans at the Front.<sup>94</sup>

These censor reports with their associated letters still survive in the archives of the British Library, while their originals are generally lost to time – with only a few recently resurfacing.<sup>95</sup> This creates a paradoxical situation where the creation of archive of colonial surveillance and control allowed sepoy testimony to survive. For quite a while it was argued by scholars such as Claude Markovits these reports were the only viable source of sepoy testimony "since no wartime diaries have miraculously surfaced in some barn in the

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<sup>91</sup> Havildar Abdul Rahman, France, 20/5/1915 quoted in Omissi, 61.

<sup>92</sup> Omissi, 5–6.

<sup>93</sup> Omissi, 7.

<sup>94</sup> Kristina Myrvold and Andreas Johansson, 'Miniature Qur'ans in the First World War: Religious Comforts for Indian Muslim Soldiers', *Postscripts: The Journal of Sacred Texts, Cultural Histories, and Contemporary Contexts* 9, no. 2–3 (22 October 2018): 203, <https://doi.org/10.1558/post.35862>.

<sup>95</sup> Das, *India, Empire, and First World War Culture*, 207.

Punjab.”<sup>96</sup> Santanu Das’ recent overview of Indian cultural representation during the war has included newly-discovered sources of testimony that prove Markovits had been unduly pessimistic.<sup>97</sup> Nevertheless there is nothing else like the sheer breadth of correspondence contained in the censor reports.

However, can these censor reports ‘speak’? Created under conditions of surveillance and multiple layers of external intervention, how far can we say that these letters contain the essence of a true sepoy voice? We have identified that the degree of censorship was haphazard, but the presence of an authoritarian colonial observer would certainly have changed the content of the letters. To what extent can we say this was an issue?

Sepoys were from the outset aware that their correspondence was a not a private affair. External intervention began at the level of letter-composition. A few sepoys were already literate at the start of the war, and some learned to read and their own letters during their time in France – <sup>98</sup> but the vast majority relied upon scribes. We do not know for certain who the scribes were. Many scribes were likely Indian soldiers, as few others would have possessed the knowledge to write in Indian languages.<sup>99</sup> Some British officers themselves may have worked as scribes.<sup>100</sup> We can speculate that sepoys dictating to a ‘sahib’ would be more reticent, but it is impossible to tell from reading a letter to whom it might have been dictated. The scarcity of the literacy also made writing and reading the letters acts of public spectacle, both at the Front and India itself. Sepoy letters would

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<sup>96</sup> Claude Markovits, ‘Indian Soldiers’ Experiences in France During World War I: Seeing Europe from the Rear of the Front’, in *The World in World Wars: Experiences, Perceptions and Perspectives from Africa and Asia*, ed. Heike Liebau, Studies in Global Social History, v. 5 (Leiden, The Netherlands ; Boston: Brill, 2010), 39.

<sup>97</sup> Das, *India, Empire, and First World War Culture*. Most notably letters and journals from Mesopotamia and the personal diaries and letters of soldiers and labourers.

<sup>98</sup> Mir Zaman Khan, France, 12/3/1916 quoted in Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*, 163.

<sup>99</sup> Omissi, 5.

<sup>100</sup> A possibility corroborated in Rudyard Kipling’s *The Eyes of Asia* (1918), written based on Kipling’s firsthand observations of Indian soldiers recovering in Britain. Rudyard Kipling, ‘The Fumes of the Heart’, in *The Eyes of Asia* (Doubleday, 1918), 25.

often be read out aloud before being posted,<sup>101</sup> and there are multiple instances of sepoys peevishly telling their correspondents to avoid writing things that were embarrassing to have read out in public.<sup>102</sup> The public nature of this correspondence thus instilled a “high value on social (and sexual) conformity” even before the layer of censorship.<sup>103</sup> It is also impossible to tell to what degree the content of the letters were written by the scribes, not just in the sense of transcription but outright authorship. Did the scribes edit the authors’ speech to save time, insert stock phrases and embellishments, or themselves avoid subjects that might get censored? Santanu Das describes at least one such scribal embellishment that recurs constantly – describing Europe as a ‘second paradise’<sup>104</sup> – but there are other repetitions, such as the constant refrain of “How can I write?” or “What can I write?”<sup>105</sup> Yet there is no way to decide if these are scribal interventions or merely stock phrases used by sepoys who lacked the capacity to articulate war experience.

As to censorship, the sepoys were largely aware of it. Some sepoys even went so far as to directly address the censor, asking him for lenience, urging him to remove any offending material but not destroy the letter.<sup>106</sup> There does not seem to be resentment or surprise at the existence of censorship, but sepoys tried to get around it, nevertheless. At times codes were used to pass along information that the sepoys thought would surely be too sensitive to write nakedly, one of the most prominent examples being the use of ‘red pepper’ to refer to white troops and ‘black pepper’ to refer to Indians when describing the

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<sup>101</sup> Markovits, ‘Indian Soldiers’ Experiences in France During World War I: Seeing Europe from the Rear of the Front’, 37. The practice is also described in Roly Grimshaw’s novella ‘Experiences of Ram Singh, Dafadar of Horse’, written from Grimshaw’s personal observance of Indian soldiers recuperating in hospitals in Britain. Grimshaw, ‘Experiences of Ram Singh’, 173.

<sup>102</sup> Naik Ibrahim Khan, France, 29/10/1915; Niaz Hussein, France, 27/6/1916 quoted in Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*, 115.

<sup>103</sup> Markovits, ‘Indian Soldiers’ Experiences in France During World War I: Seeing Europe from the Rear of the Front’, 37.

<sup>104</sup> Das, ‘The Singing Subaltern’, 13.

<sup>105</sup> A wounded Garhwali to his guru, England, 17/2/1915; Naik Main Ram, Brighton, 9/6/1915; Sepoy Lal Chand, Brighton, 25/6/1915; Prabhu Dayal, Brighton, 25/6/1915; Sowar Sohan Singh, Brighton, 10/6/1915; Ghulam Abbas Ali Khan, France, 31/8/1915; Shah Nawaz, Marseilles, 1/9/1915; Gajan Singh, France, 25/6/1916 quoted in Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*.

<sup>106</sup> Teja Singh, Brighton, 12/8/1915; Dilbar, Punjab, 21/5/1916; Driver Lal Din, France, 14/7/1916; quoted in Omissi, ‘The Indian Army in Europe, 1914–1918’, 88, 187, 206–7.

depletion and exhaustion of Indian regiments on the Western Front and how British troops were replacing them. The censors were aware of the ruse and did not restrict such letters.<sup>107</sup> Thus, the awareness of censorship could lead to an excess of self-silencing not warranted by the actual degree of colonial vigilance, and sepoys resorted to highly oblique language and the use of parables whose coded nature was made clear by stating variations on “think clearly on this”. Whether these parables were understood by the recipients or not, the censorship clearly acted as an obstacle to free, unfiltered speech.

Given these layers of mediation and intervention, can the censor reports be taken at face value as representing genuine sepoy testimony? Evelyn Howell, Head Censor, was initially optimistic regarding the “unstudied” and “genuine” sentiments expressed in the letters, but later he became more disillusioned and doubted that sepoys expressed themselves freely under censorship.<sup>108</sup> However, Omissi has argued that this is Howell oscillating between two unlikely extremes:

The historian must always be alert to the impact of scribal intervention, censorship and self-censorship. Certainly the uncensored record of the troops might have been different; but, equally, most soldiers had no other means of communicating with their families. The sheer quantity of letters (roughly one per man per fortnight) shows the personal importance of the postal service to the troops... The historian can be too sceptical as well as too credulous. The crucial issue is, surely, less what we cannot learn from these letters, than what we can learn from them. What do they reveal about the experiences and mentalities of Indian peasant soldiers?<sup>109</sup>

Omissi’s argument that the censorship did not deter the sepoys from producing a vast corpus of letters is significant. Sepoys ‘spoke’ so often through these letters that it

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<sup>107</sup> Bugler Mause Ram, Brighton, 2/4/1915; Sepoy Mansa Ram, Brighton, April 1915; Lance Naik Ram Carup Singh, Milford-on-Sea, May 1915; quoted in Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*, 49, 57–58, 65.

<sup>108</sup> Omissi, 9.

<sup>109</sup> Omissi, 9.

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would be irresponsible to dismiss the entire archive as tainted or compromised; they must have felt that their intentions of communication were served despite the censorship. Our awareness of the structures of colonial silencing should not make us too pessimistic regarding subaltern speech; we should read critically with an awareness of the layers of intervention that exist in the censor reports, but always with the intent of trying to feel the “heart-beat of the sepoy”<sup>110</sup> under the accretions of colonial power and historical distance. To that end, we should also consider the level of mediation that went into the selection of letters to include in the censor reports. The reports’ primary purpose serving as a barometer of the Indian Army’s mood means that the archive is also likely to be representative of the letters produced at any given period. However, Howell was a linguist with a keen eye for Indian poetry, and Claude Markovits argues that he also approached the selection of the letters with an eye towards producing a collection that would also have entertainment value.<sup>111</sup> We should be aware, then, that the censor reports are not the totality of the correspondence but a selected archive whose purpose of colonial surveillance was also potentially subverted by one man’s aesthetic preferences.

### Reading Sepoy Letters

The most immediately striking thing about the letters is how richly detailed they are. Sepoys took the opportunity of letter-writing to generate a highly varied corpus of text that reflects a mosaic of viewpoints and feelings. Unlike the baroque, stilted, mock-Orientalist dialogue in Rudyard Kipling’s *Eyes of Asia* (written based on sepoy letters provided to him by British intelligence), the real sepoy letters produced writing that was at times funny, frequently effusive and insightful, as well as often poignant and sad. While this can to an extent be attributed to Howell’s aesthetic preferences and editorial choices, where duller letters would be less likely to be included, there is no shortage of letters that are simply mundane.

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<sup>110</sup> Das, *India, Empire, and First World War Culture*, 209.

<sup>111</sup> Markovits, ‘Indian Soldiers’ Experiences in France During World War I: Seeing Europe from the Rear of the Front’, 39.

### Izzat

Skeptics of the notion of the colonial loyalist are immediately confronted with letters that speak to the importance of izzat – which was manifested through a person's loyalty to the King-Emperor. One Sikh sepoy wrote to a correspondent in Punjab, “Instead of being anxious, you should always be thanking the Guru for giving your family a chance of serving the King in Europe.”<sup>112</sup> The honour of serving the King is frequently referenced in the letters and sepoys write of the victory that they will give the King and the Government of India.<sup>113</sup> Of colonial anxieties such as the entry of the Ottoman Empire into the war through the declaration of Jihad, Muslim sepoys wrote dismissively as well.<sup>114</sup> However, it is worth noting that these articulations of loyalty are towards the person of the King, and the sepoys' own bonds with the Raj – the wider structure of the British Empire rarely enters the consciousness of these letters. Izzat is articulated as a commitment towards the embodiments of imperial power, proving the nature of the colonial army as one forged through personal and communal relationships between sepoys and their officers, and communities and the Raj. Many of the letters urging the importance of loyalty to the King-Emperor are, significantly, from India itself (the Punjab in particular, virtually a ‘home front’ for its centrality to wartime manpower needs)<sup>115</sup> and show how closely the ‘martial race’ military communities were imbricated with the apparatus of colonial security.<sup>116</sup> Some sepoys even rankled at how little regard their specific communities had as martial races, and the need to raise the profile of their caste in the army: “The whole object of military service is to raise the reputation of one's caste, and that is what we have to do.” Military service thus had complex interactions with communal pride and prestige that went beyond the notion of innate loyalty, and notions of pride and shame were always affixed “to the micro-identities of regiment, tribe and

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<sup>112</sup> Balwant Singh, France, 25/2/1917 Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*, 279.

<sup>113</sup> A wounded Sikh, England, 15/1/915; Farman Ali, Sindh, 1/4/1917; quoted in Omissi, 28, 281–82.

<sup>114</sup> A wounded Garhwali Subedar, England, 21/2/1915; quoted in Omissi, 39.

<sup>115</sup> Tan, *The Garrison State*, 99.

<sup>116</sup> An unknown writer to a Jemadar; Punjab; early January 1915?; a Tamil woman to her husband, southern India, 21/2/1915; quoted in Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*, 26, 40.

caste” and never to the concept of an Indian nationhood.<sup>117</sup> Sepoys frequently wrote positively of the conditions under which they were kept in Europe (which makes a keen contrast to the misery expressed in British trench literature) and the lengths to which the British in particular went to ensure religious and caste requirements were met.<sup>118</sup> Colonial loyalty was ensured through a mix of harsh discipline and compassionate welfare,<sup>119</sup> and through good food<sup>120</sup> and the supply of religious articles such as Qurans, sepoys could feel that their devotion was recognized and reciprocated, particularly resonant when they were presented with promotions, decorations and honoured with visits from the King himself.<sup>121</sup> However, some of the expressive loyalty and good cheer in the letters is clearly meant to reassure families back home, with one sepoy writing a genuinely affecting letter that he expects to be his last, apologizing for not having had more time to clear up his family obligations but urging his family to celebrate his death in battle.<sup>122</sup> Izzat exerted a powerful hold on sepoys to not be seen to deviate from their expected duties, as to waver would be to be ‘like a woman’ or a ‘sodomite’, and abandon their conformity to a discourse of racialized masculinity that saw martial race notions articulated and expressed by the soldiers and their communities themselves.<sup>123</sup> A genuine desire to conform to these group norms seems to animate the letters more than a fear of being seen as disloyal.

However, despite the stress placed in martial race discourses on the paternalistic relationship between sepoys and their white commanders and the belief that it was

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<sup>117</sup> Omissi, 12.

<sup>118</sup> Omissi, 11.

<sup>119</sup> Singh, *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars: Between Self and Sepoy*, 62.

<sup>120</sup> “Every man gets atta, dal and vegetables. There is no weighing (as much as he wants, it is brought) and of other things four annas worth of ghi, and fruit of every kind; three ounces of sugar, and of cigarettes as many as he likes; eight ounces of wheat and as much clothes as he may wish; wine two ounces. But don't you think that, simply because it is to be had, Ram Camp Singh eats or drinks these things. Not at all - it is just as one feels inclined.” Lance Naik Ram Carup Singh, Millford-on-Sea, May 1915 ; quoted in Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*, 65.

<sup>121</sup> Subedar-Major Sardard Bahadur Gagan, Brighton, early January 1915?; quoted in Omissi, 27.

<sup>122</sup> Jemadar Indar Singh, France, 15/9/1916; quoted in Omissi, 234–35.

<sup>123</sup> Omissi, 13.

primarily this bond that allowed the Indian soldiers to fight effectively in Europe,<sup>124</sup> the sepoys in their letters do not speak much of the men who lead them. As Omissi observed, the sepoys rarely mentioned officers by name and generally only in the context of something to complain about. While this might be due to the high casualty rates in the officer corps which meant that sepoys often served under men they didn't know well "it certainly suggests that the bond between British officers and Indian men was not as close as the former often liked to assume."<sup>125</sup> However, the devotion expressed towards the King-Emperor and to the former Commanders-in-Chief of the Indian Army, Kitchener and Roberts, indicate that distant imperial figureheads attracted a certain totemic loyalty.<sup>126</sup>

### Trauma and Pain

Creeping underneath the effusion of loyalty is a jarring fatalism, as sepoys proudly proclaim that they would willingly martyr themselves for the King, and the stress of the death motif suggests an awareness of the fragility of life under the conditions in which these sepoys were forced to prove their loyalty and izzat. The confidence with which one sepoy declares, "Without death there is no victory, but I am alive and very well, and tell you truly that I will return alive to India"<sup>127</sup> can be contrasted to the manic energy of a wounded Garhwali sepoy who declares feverishly that he is willing to die for the King-Emperor, that it is a good death to die in battle in the King's service, and that he desires nothing more than to recover from his wounds so he can display his loyalty on the battlefield once more.<sup>128</sup> Another highly curious letter comes in two parts, where in the first the sepoy writes with exhilaration after a battle of "knocking the Germans flat" and how God would give the King victory as a certainty; but the latter part, written on a separate piece of paper, is chilling and reads like a mental breakdown:

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<sup>124</sup> Greenhut, 'Sahib and Sepoy'.

<sup>125</sup> Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*, 20.

<sup>126</sup> Pensioned Sergeant of Police Gobind Saha, Rawalpindi District, 14/9/1915; Ghirdari Lal, Central Provinces, 9/6/1916; Alia Nakha Khan, France, 16/6/1916; quoted in Omissi, 100-101, 195-96.

<sup>127</sup> A Muslim officer to his brother, France, December 1914; quoted in Omissi, 25.

<sup>128</sup> A wounded Garhwali Subedar, England, 21/2/1915; quoted in Omissi, 39.



God knows whether the land of France is stained with sin or whether the Day of Judgement has begun in France. For guns and of rifles [sic] there is now a deluge, bodies upon bodies, and blood flowing. God preserve us, what has come to pass! From dawn to dark and from dark to dawn it goes on like the hail that fell at Swarra[?] camp. But especially our guns have filled the German trenches with dead and made them brim with blood. God grant us grace, for grace is needed. Oh God, we repent! Oh God, we repent!<sup>129</sup>

The censor comments on this letter as “a curious psychological study, showing traces both of the nerve shattering experience through which the writer has passed and of the exhilaration induced by success.” The shellshock evident in this letter and that written by the wounded Garhwali (referred to previously) is repeated across other letters that speak to the horror of the war. Hindu sepoy reached for apocalyptic references to the Mahabharata, with one stating, simply: “This is not war. It is the ending of the world”,<sup>130</sup> and a Sikh declared, “The battle is beginning and men are dying like maggots. No one can count them - not in thousands but in hundreds and thousands of thousands. No one can count them.” Is it coincidence that the worst of these outpourings of despair and shock are from wounded soldiers? The Indian army had been trained for border skirmishes and used light artillery; the mass-produced slaughter and thunder of modern war, shocking to Europeans, must have truly been beyond the pale – yet there is little research devoted to exploring psychological trauma among these peasant-soldiers caught in a war where originated the term ‘shell-shock’. Only Hilary Buxton has written on shellshock in the Indian Army in World War I, and she argued that sepoy suffering from mental and physical trauma were understood by British medical staff, and the censors themselves, as expressions of collective, racialized woes, where the experiences of soldiers were categorized according to the martial races they were conceptualized as falling within

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<sup>129</sup> Amir Khan, France, 18/3/1915; quoted in Omissi, 43.

<sup>130</sup> A wounded Punjabi Rajput, England, 29/1/1915; quoted in Omissi, 32.

– “racial typologies of trauma”.<sup>131</sup> The relative hardness of races and their martial reputations were leveraged to judge which sepoys were truly invalidated and who were simply pretending in order to avoid being sent back to fight, that is, malingering.

Malingering was heavily punished, but sepoy still attempted it, often through self-inflicting wounds or blinding themselves.<sup>132</sup> Letters contained advice between sepoys on how to safely wound themselves in order to get out of duty or be sent home directly (such as: “Eat the fat, but preserve the bone carefully”,<sup>133</sup> in reference to bayonet use); the letters were often encoded in ways that the censors could spot immediately, whereas others spoke with candour of the effects of having shot themselves in the hand.<sup>134</sup> Many sepoys tried to push through their trauma by asking for in their letters for protective amulets from home, traditional medicine or even opium and cannabis.<sup>135</sup> Others sought out subtler alternatives to self-mutilation through their correspondence, such as requesting the seeds of the bhaiwala plant, which was used by washermen to mark clothes and thus could be in a sepoy’s kit without arousing suspicion; the seeds could be applied to produce a serious inflammation on the body. Sepoys boasted that British doctors were “blind” and unable to tell when such subtle tricks were played;<sup>136</sup> of course, if the censors were not initially aware of the uses of the bhaiwala plant’s seed, such correspondence soon alerted them. Elaborate ploys such as one Muslim sepoy pretending to be a Hindu washerman in his request for bhaiwali seeds from home ended his letter: “Ram Ram to all Hindus.” The censor saw through this immediately.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Hilary Buxton, ‘Imperial Amnesia: Race, Trauma and Indian Troops in the First World War’, *Past & Present* 241, no. 1 (1 November 2018): 232, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gyo23>.

<sup>132</sup> Muhabhat Khan, France, 9/2/1916; Sultan Mahomed Khan, 16/9/1916; quoted in Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*, 150, 236.

<sup>133</sup> Colour Havildar Mir Haider Jan, England, 20/3/1915; quoted in Singh, *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars: Between Self and Sepoy*, 90.

<sup>134</sup> Das, *India, Empire, and First World War Culture*, 217.

<sup>135</sup> Buxton, ‘Imperial Amnesia’, 237.

<sup>136</sup> Singh, *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars: Between Self and Sepoy*, 91–92.

<sup>137</sup> ‘Ram Lal, Dhobi’, France, 19/9/1915; quoted in Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*, 103.

However, as amusing as such feeble attempts to escape the censors' notice are, the underlying contradiction between the profusion of loyalty, belief in war service as tied to izzat, and this marked desire to get sent away from the front even at the cost of self-inflicting wounds – must be answered. Sepoys did not see malingering as disloyalty. Rather, they saw wounded soldiers as having done their duty and earned the right to return. The policy of returning the lightly wounded to the front was widely condemned in the letters, even as the actual care for the wounded was often praised, and several wrote to the King himself to petition him to change policy (which seems to have had the desired effect.)<sup>138</sup> Malingering could be seen as an act of subaltern resistance in extremis, or a symptom of a contract of trust between an empire and its collaborators that had gone awry, and it is significant that sepoys appealed to the figure they saw themselves as ultimately loyal to, the King, to intervene and discharge them from their duty. The structures of colonial loyalty cannot be denied in the letters, but izzat cannot be taken for granted as surpassing the trauma that led a Gurkha to run amok in the trenches and begin to murder his allies<sup>139</sup>, or lead a sepoy whose brother had passed to write to his mother, “My brother is gone from me; my brother is dead ... Now I am dead ... All the grief that is in the world is now upon me. The world is about to pass away ... When the merciful God made wretched men, why did he not slay them in their childhood?”<sup>140</sup> The cold contrast of the censor's note that follows (“Letter passed”) remind us uncomfortably of the imperial power that co-opted these men's loyalties into feeling such pain.

The censors were keenly aware of such grief and tried to suppress it as much as possible within the letters to prevent too demoralizing an image of frontline life to percolate to India. After the war medical consensus leaned towards acknowledging cases of insanity among Indian troops, but that shell shock had not been prevalent. Martial race

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<sup>138</sup> Omissi, 14.

<sup>139</sup> An incident related by the sepoy who ultimately had to shoot him. Dafadar Ali Mardan, Egypt, 20/4/1916; quoted in Omissi, 178.

<sup>140</sup> Mir Aslam Khan; France, 27/1/1916; quoted in Omissi, 144. Aslam Khan wanted his mother to write to him more regularly, to assuage his loneliness.

discourses, troubled by the realities of sepoy trauma, resumed their hegemony, silencing these memories.<sup>141</sup>

### Occidentalism

Claire Buck has argued that writings produced from the Western Front tended to either be travelogues or use the perspectives and language of travel writing to represent the transformed terrain of the warzone.<sup>142</sup> Maurice Barrés observed that the “war scene is strange and pathetic”<sup>143</sup> and that the Indian soldiers were of a piece with this altered landscape as he watched “strange and beautiful beings from the East file past under the poplars of France.”<sup>144</sup> While the sepoys themselves were a part of the spectacle of an altered Europe, the sepoys themselves wrote of their experiences with the language of travelers as well. Claude Markovits in his analysis of the censor reports saw the letters as representative of a discourse “occidentalism from below” where occidentalism is “any body of knowledge and any representation concerning the West developed by non-Westerners”, and they wrote from ‘below’ in that their notions of the West had little relationship with any previous travel-writing created by cosmopolitan Indian elites.<sup>145</sup> We may also consider the sepoys as having written from ‘below’ in the sense of their place as subalterns speaking through an archive of colonial surveillance.

In their occidentalism many sepoys deployed to Europe were only beginning to discover that England, Belgium and France were distinct states and they often spoke in general of ‘this country’. Describing Europe to their relatives, sepoys were fascinated by oddities such as the Flemish practice of using dogs to turn wheels that churned butter and misconceived French roadside calvaries to be a method of executing thieves.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Buxton, ‘Imperial Amnesia’, 252.

<sup>142</sup> Buck, *Conceiving Strangeness in British First World War Writing*, chap. 2.

<sup>143</sup> Barrés, ‘A Visit to the English Army: The Gurkhas and Sikhs’, 3.

<sup>144</sup> Barrés, 7.

<sup>145</sup> Markovits, ‘Indian Soldiers’ Experiences in France During World War I: Seeing Europe from the Rear of the Front’, 40.

<sup>146</sup> “They fix him alive and upright to a stake and fasten his hands with nails, and there he dies.” A wounded Sikh, England, 18/1/1915; quoted in Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*, 29–30.

Soldiers were generally astonished by Europe, calling it “a fairyland”<sup>147</sup>, impressed with its climate, the fertility of French soil, the beauty of its population, by the sights and sounds of the big cities (including Madame Tussaud’s in London)<sup>148</sup> and the astonishing wealth contained within them.<sup>149</sup> Comparisons to were India were inevitable; sepoys often expressed how backwards they considered India when set against European prosperity and advancement, and these letters often expressed a disturbing self-loathing. As an example, an educated sub-assistant surgeon lamented that, “Our people copy the faults of the British nation and leave its good qualities alone. We shall never advance ourselves merely by wearing trousers and hats and smoking cigarettes and drinking wine. In fact they have a real moral superiority. They are energetic.”<sup>150</sup> Yet another soldier said, “the Creator has shown the perfection of his beneficence in Europe, and we people [Indians] have been created only for the purpose of completing the totality of the world.”<sup>151</sup> These narratives of an inherent European superiority and Indian backwardness were well-aligned with a martial race discourse of racial hierarchy: the British, as the “energetic” race were naturally entitled to guide the lethargic populations of India, and to control the more active and virile but nevertheless ignorant martial races.<sup>152</sup> However, several sepoys, even while critical of India, did not reach for a narrative of racialized inferiority but pointed out the material conditions within which India could be advanced, such as through education.<sup>153</sup> The focus on education is particularly interesting in the context of martial race policies that tried to cultivate an uneducated, illiterate army; encountering Europe and communicating vociferously through letters, the loyal martial races were clearly becoming conscious of the limitations of being uneducated.

Ravi Ahuja argued that the sepoys were initially awestruck by Europe, but “the idea that the Punjabi or Nepali peasant-soldier must have been absolutely dumbfounded when

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<sup>147</sup> Subedar-Major Sardar Bahadur Gagan, Brighton, early January 1915; quoted in Omissi, 27.

<sup>148</sup> Mir Iaffar, France, 16/5/1916; quoted in Omissi, 185.

<sup>149</sup> A wounded Garhwali subedar, 21/2/1915; Saif Ali, France, 17/8/1915; quoted in Omissi, 39, 90.

<sup>150</sup> A sub-assistant surgeon, England, late January or early February, 1915?; quoted in Omissi, 15.

<sup>151</sup> Shah Nawaz, Marseilles, 1/9/1915 quoted in Omissi, 96.

<sup>152</sup> MacMunn, *The Martial Races of India*, 355.

<sup>153</sup> Firoz Khan, France, 20/3/1916; quoted in Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*, 166.

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confronted with complex European realities can be misleading if rendered in terms of absolutes.”<sup>154</sup> Garrulous sepoys were often keen for knowledge of the war and Europe, and through encountering the diversity of nations in wartime Europe: “the war had provided scales to assess the relative weight of the King-Emperor—scales that had not been available earlier. British power could be compared to that of its imperialist rivals”<sup>155</sup>, and in their descriptions of the war situation they often expressed a grudging respect or even open admiration for German military might and technological ingenuity,<sup>156</sup> while at the same time being indignant of German atrocities in Belgium.<sup>157</sup> One remarkable letter explains the history of Joan of Arc and comments on the strangeness of France and Britain working together and the possible fragility of the alliance to overcome centuries of bad blood,<sup>158</sup> and another letter (withheld by the censor) tried to slyly enquire as to how the French saw and treated the Algerian soldiers they had deployed on the Western Front – in order to compare their treatment to that of Indians by Britain.<sup>159</sup> Far from being uniformly ignorant and abject, these letters display sophisticated understandings of and engagements with colonial power.

### The status of women

One of the aspects of French life that struck many sepoys was the apparent state of women’s rights. Letters are full of praise for the stoicism of French women, whose male relatives were being killed in the war but who still never expressed “a word of re lamentation”;<sup>160</sup> at least one sepoy urged his wife to follow the French example and “be as brave as a man.”<sup>161</sup> The education of European women impressed the sepoys as well, and

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<sup>154</sup> Ahuja, ‘Corrosiveness of Comparison: Reverberations of Indian Wartime Experiences in German Prison Camps (1915-1919)’, 156.

<sup>155</sup> Ahuja, 156.

<sup>156</sup> A South Indian Muslim, a hospital ship, 9/2/1915; quoted in Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*, 35; – (name withheld), Brockenhurst, 1915; quoted in Das, *India, Empire, and First World War Culture*, 214–15.

<sup>157</sup> Rifleman Amar Singh Rawat, Brighton, 26 March 1915. Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*, 45.

<sup>158</sup> Jalal-ud-Din Ahmed, France, 14/10/1915; quoted in Omissi, 108.

<sup>159</sup> Storekeeper Ram Jawan Singh, Brighton, 26/9/1915; quoted in Omissi, 102–3.

<sup>160</sup> Sub-Assistant Surgeon T. H. Gupta, Brighton, 9/6/1915; quoted in Omissi, 70.

<sup>161</sup> Woordi-Major Jivan Singh, France, 7/2/1917; quoted in Omissi, 276.

several wrote letters urging that girls in their own families be educated.<sup>162</sup> Sepoys seemed unaware that they were viewing wartime gender relations in Europe, where women were forced by necessity to become more self-sufficient and patriarchal had control loosened.<sup>163</sup> Letters that, for example, spoke admiringly that women in France were never beaten, and that after marriage there is always domestic harmony,<sup>164</sup> do not reflect the reality that such gendered violence was far from unknown in France.<sup>165</sup> These letters display ‘occidentalism’ of an ideal type, imagining a Western culture free of the social ills that the sepoy saw in India. Markovits argued that the sepoy’s belief in gender relations as a crucial marker of difference between Europe and India, especially when expressed via the racialized self-loathing some sepoy displayed in their letters, might be “simply a function of the hegemonic power of colonial discourse over the minds of colonized subjects” – but it might reflect a genuine desire to enact social change in India to accord with what they perceived in Europe. In any case, not all progressive attitudes displayed by the sepoy are attributed to the example of the French.<sup>166</sup> While some wrote from an urge to see India elevated out of a state of being that they saw as relatively primitive, other sepoy spoke out of a more personal interest: they wanted to be able to write letters to their wives without having to worry about anyone else seeing the letters.<sup>167</sup> Many sepoy also expressed other intimacies: they wrote admiringly of the older French women that they were billeted with in France, with whom they established warm relationships as

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<sup>162</sup> Dafadar Ranjit Lal, France, 26/11/1916 Omissi, 257–58.

<sup>163</sup> Markovits, ‘Indian Soldiers’ Experiences in France During World War I: Seeing Europe from the Rear of the Front’, 46.

<sup>164</sup> Teja Singh, France, 26/6/1916; Teja Singh, France, 6/3/1918; quoted in Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*, 196–97, 357. Teja Singh was a prolific writer of letters.

<sup>165</sup> Claude Markovits, ‘Indian Soldiers’ Experience in France: Perceptions and Outcomes’, in *Indian Soldiers in the First World War: Re-Visiting a Global Conflict*, ed. Ashutosh Kumar and Claude Markovits, 1st ed. (Routledge India, 2020), 97, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003142362>. Markovits also made the observation that sepoy admiring the way Frenchwomen managed without men did not seem to consider that their own wives back home were having to deal with similar challenges.

<sup>166</sup> Ishar Singh, France, 4/3/1918; Ressaldar Bishan Singh, France, 28/8/1917; Khalil Ullah, France, 3/3/1918; quoted in Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*, 356–7, 315–6, 356.

<sup>167</sup> One sepoy lamented his own inability to read, preventing him from receiving news about his mother and other female relatives: “they read out our letters to our officers, and then they discuss the contents. It is a shameful thing to read out to the Sahibs what may be said about women in our letters.”Kumar Gul, France, 25/1/1918; quoted in Omissi, 352.

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almost surrogate sons – many of these women having lost sons in the war.<sup>168</sup> It is in documenting such moments of genuine affect that the censor reports transcend their function as an exercise of colonial power and become a repository of human experience.

### Sex and marriage

As is the pattern with the archive, alongside letters that speak respectfully of European women we also find ones that are more misogynistic. Several made boastful comments about sexual encounters with white women. Often these were clearly fanciful boasts as in the case of one sepoy who inserted into a letter to a friend a cigarette card displaying the 18<sup>th</sup> century Duchess of Gordon and claimed that he was sleeping with her.<sup>169</sup> Many, however, spoke frankly of real encounters, portraying a Europe where the women “bestow their favours freely.”<sup>170</sup> Regardless of the credibility of the letter, the censors were diligent in not letting such letters pass. Howell was adamant that the sepoys not “conceive a wrong idea of the ‘izzat’ of the English women. A sentiment which if not properly held in check would be most detrimental to the prestige and spirit of European rule in India.”<sup>171</sup> Colonial control in India was delineated partly by policing the encounters of white women and brown men, the fear of interracial sex and miscegenation being a European colonial nightmare in general; but in feared crises of colonial control the paranoia over such sexual encounter heightened.<sup>172</sup> The hospitals for Indian wounded in Britain, especially the Royal Pavilion in Brighton, were very prominent in British propaganda and acted as a message to India on the great lengths taken to take care of the sepoys, with extensive arrangements for their religious and caste needs; nurses were banished from these hospitals to reduce the symbolic visibility of contact between Indians and white

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<sup>168</sup> Markovits, ‘Indian Soldiers’ Experiences in France During World War I: Seeing Europe from the Rear of the Front’, 48.

<sup>169</sup> Tura Baz Khan, Brighton, 23/10/1915; quoted in Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*, 113.

<sup>170</sup> Balwant Singh, France, 24/10/1915; quoted in Omissi, 114.

<sup>171</sup> Howell, ‘Censor’s Report’.

<sup>172</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*, vol. 40 (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2002), 59, <http://choicereviews.org/review/10.5860/CHOICE.40-4761>.



women.<sup>173</sup> Sepoys in hospitals in Britain were resentful of the strict surveillance kept on them to stop them meeting white women (eventually leading to an Indian sub-assistant surgeon's unsuccessful attempt to murder the commanding officer at his hospital).<sup>174</sup> Sex did occur, however,<sup>175</sup> and tried to get coded references to it past the censor, usually by referring these women as 'fruit' – but the censors were good at catching the reference for what it was.<sup>176</sup> Sexual control was harder to exert over liaisons in France, however, and many sepoy were delighted at the welcome they received in brothels.<sup>177</sup> Given that many sepoy were billeted among French households, and the absence of French men during this time, romance and sexual liaison was inevitable regardless of the British commanders' distaste for it. Some Muslim sepoy were quite adamant in their letters that they would not engage in premarital sex with Christian women, but it is difficult to read these letters and not think the authors protest too much.<sup>178</sup> Marriages between French women and Muslim sepoy were first allowed in October 1916, and several sepoy took the opportunity to leave the army and consider life with their 'mademoiselles', to the extent of even converting to Christianity.<sup>179</sup> Gajendra Singh has discovered that these open-minded attitudes towards interracial and inter-religious romance changed among Muslim sepoy in late 1916, when coded letters began to reach the troops, accusing them of violating their religion through impropriety. Several of the Muslim sepoy expressed disgust at what they saw as the lax sexual mores in Europe and a general disregard for religion.<sup>180</sup> However it is Muslim sepoy themselves who went farthest in their relationships with French women. Many letters deal with the case of Mahomed Khan, who married a Frenchwoman seemingly of his own volition, an incident that excited

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<sup>173</sup> Hyson and Lester, "British India on Trial".

<sup>174</sup> Hyson and Lester, 27.

<sup>175</sup> Storekeeper D. N. Sircar, Brighton, 12/11/1915; quoted in Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*, 119.

<sup>176</sup> Omissi, 8.

<sup>177</sup> Singh, *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars: Between Self and Sepoy*, 83.

<sup>178</sup> Maula Dad Khan, France, 24/10/1915; Risaldar Anjamuddin Khan, France, 20/12/1915; quoted in Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*, 114, 126–27.

<sup>179</sup> Singh, *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars: Between Self and Sepoy*, 115.

<sup>180</sup> Markovits, 'Indian Soldiers' Experience in France: Perceptions and Outcomes', 97.

much comment from the troops;<sup>181</sup> Mahomed Khan, is at first defiant in his decision to marry,<sup>182</sup> but as he becomes ostracized from his troops he begins to paint an unlikely picture of having been forced to marry by a royal order,<sup>183</sup> and begins to curse his own daughter as having been born to a Kafir.<sup>184</sup> As Omissi points out, the wedding was likely done to cover up a pregnancy scandal;<sup>185</sup> Khan's religious protestation may reflect the effect of Islamist propaganda in the troops, but in painting a picture of himself as a pious Muslim forced by the King himself to marry a Christian Frenchwoman he might simply have been trying to deflect from his own culpability in a situation he was unhappy with. Our interpretations of these letters are equally contingent of our understandings of the stories behind them; in Mahomed Khan's case we have the privilege of knowing a wider picture that is otherwise denied to us.

## Conclusion

The colonial Indian sepoy during World War I has been imagined as a member of a heroic martial race, a simple-minded loyalist motivated by an Orientalist conception of honour, as a savage primitive, as a potential Indian nationalist or Jihadist rebel, and until recently dismissed as a discomfiting reminder of the colonial subaltern as complicit in imperial violence. Each of these discourses structures a particular way of imagining the sepoy that delegitimizes alternate viewpoints. When we read the sepoy letters contained in the archive of censor reports, we find that the sepoys in their own speech worked along the grain of imperial loyalty while struggling with a range of new experiences that reveal the complexity that underlies even seemingly simple assertions of devotion to izzat. The sepoy was not loyal or disloyal to Empire, critical or uncritical – even speech that seemed to show that they acknowledged the superiority of European civilization contained the

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<sup>181</sup> Abdul Ali, France, 28/2/1917; Zabur Shah, France, 6/10/1917; quoted in Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*, 279, 322.

<sup>182</sup> Mohamed Khan, France, 28/5/1917; 'CIM 1917-1918', n.d., pt. 3; quoted in Singh, *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars: Between Self and Sepoy*, 117.

<sup>183</sup> Mohamed Khan, France, 18/6/1917; quoted in Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*, 298–99.

<sup>184</sup> Mohamed Khan, France, 20/8/1917; 'CIM 1917-1918', pt. 4; quoted in Singh, *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars: Between Self and Sepoy*, 118.

<sup>185</sup> Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*, 322.

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desire to enact social change in India instead of allowing the status quo to be maintained. Deliberate structures of silencing over matters such as war trauma, the desire to get out of the battlefield even at the cost of self-mutilation, interracial liaisons with white women, pushed the sepoy to conform to British expectations of tractable, unquestioning martial race heroes; but the sepoys continued to have complex feelings and difficult experiences that they wished to articulate and resolve. We thus do not see the hegemonic discourse of martial races disproved, we do not find counter-evidence that in fact sepoys actively plotted the downfall of Empire; but we see glimpses of the real human beings whose memories have been filtered down into simplified tropes.

The complexity of the discourses in the censor reports make a specific conclusion or argument regarding the nature of the sepoy difficult, or indeed impossible, to make. Additionally, the layers of intervention that acted upon the letters and preserved them for our reading today mean that we cannot say definitively what the nature of sepoy discourse would have been. Instead, as Spivak wrote regarding accounts of sati in colonial India, “the most one can sense is the immense heterogeneity breaking through.”<sup>186</sup> It may be pithy or self-evident to argue that 140,000 men were indeed all individuals who resist categorization; yet the historical tide of discourse about the sepoy has exactly gone against what is obvious and prevented us from seeing men instead of tropes. Even in an archive built to indicate imperial pressures for sepoys to conform in their own discourses, we see so much that challenges simplification that we can definitively say that nothing can or should be said about what the men of the Indian Army as a whole were really like. The sepoy voice has been imagined to be saying many things; we find that there was no such thing as *a* ‘sepoy voice.’

The unmanageable heterogeneity of sepoy discourse is made all the more relevant due to the growing body of representation of Indian soldiers that has emerged in the wake of the Centenary. In Britain the role of colonial labour has been emphasized in

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<sup>186</sup> Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, 297.

public commemoration to highlight the historical links between a multicultural Britain and the imperial nature of the war.<sup>187</sup> The sepoy holds a particularly prominent place in this commemoration, as a heroic martial race figure who can be celebrated with fewer problematizations than other colonial soldiers.<sup>188</sup> An uncomplicated discourse of heroic sepoys is evident in the Baroness Warsi's observation, "Our boys weren't just Tommies – they were Tariqs and Tajinders too, and we have a duty to remember their bravery and commemorate their sacrifices."<sup>189</sup> The imperial racist hierarchies that separated Muslim Tariqs and Sikh Tajinders from British Tommies are blotted out in a portrayal of imperial cooperation and mutual sacrifice. Celebrating but not questioning the relationship of the sepoy to the British empire aligns war commemoration with a broader agenda of smoothening out of the subjectivity of South Asian communities in a modern multicultural Britain and enables the example of men such as Khudadad Khan – the first Muslim recipient of the Victoria Cross – to be mobilized as a "powerful riposte" to the folk devil of the Islamist seeking to subvert British Muslim minorities.<sup>190</sup> The modern construct of the heroic sepoy, continuing martial race discourses, enables the public performance of loyalty by South Asian communities whose sense of belonging is increasingly seen as contingent in a British public discourse dominant by a rising anti-immigrant sensibility. As Khudadad Khan's example shows, this loyalty is itself performed to align with the dominant security discourses of the British state. South Asians in Britain are encouraged to see in the sepoy an aspirational figure that allows them to subsume themselves within British 'militarised multicultural'<sup>191</sup> today, through sanitization of the

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<sup>187</sup> Lucy Noakes, 'Centenary (United Kingdom)', *International Encyclopedia of the First World War (WW1)*, 6 March 2019, [https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/centenary\\_united\\_kingdom](https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/centenary_united_kingdom); *The World's War: Forgotten Soldiers of Empire*, 2014, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3967920/>.

<sup>188</sup> Catriona Pennell, 'Taught to Remember? British Youth and First World War Centenary Battlefield Tours', *Cultural Trends* 27, no. 2 (15 March 2018): 46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09548963.2018.1453449>.

<sup>189</sup> Jane Merrick and Kashmira Gander, 'Special Report: The Centenary of WWI - "Tommies and Tariqs Fought Side by Side"', *The Independent*, 23 June 2013, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/special-report-the-centenary-of-wwi-tommies-and-tariqs-fought-side-by-side-8669758.html>.

<sup>190</sup> Dilwar Hussain, a Muslim academic who signed a joint letter to *the Telegraph* alongside British MPs and Muslim religious leaders in commemoration of Khudadad Khan; quoted in Edward Malnick, 'First Muslim To Be Awarded Victoria Cross Needs Recognition, Say Former Army Chiefs', *The Telegraph Online*, 31 October 2014.

<sup>191</sup> Vron Ware, *Military Migrants: Fighting for YOUR Country* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137010032>.

Indian soldier's historical relationship to the British imperial security apparatus. Now, more than ever, troubling this discourse is necessary. As Santanu Das wrote, in World War I "hundreds of thousands of non-white men were voyaging to the heart of whiteness and beyond to witness the 'horror, the horror' of Western civilization."<sup>192</sup> An understanding of sepoy feeling as a palimpsest within which loyalty is imbricated with such horror allows for the construction of a cultural memory of Indian war participation which, if unable to ever become 'true', is not blatantly falsehood.

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<sup>192</sup> Das, 'The Singing Subaltern', 6.

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