

The Sepoy in Europe: Agency and Coercion under Racialized Colonial Power on World War I's Western Front

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This article explores questions of agency and coercion under the constraints of racialized colonial power across the recruitment, transport, and treatment of these soldiers during their military migration to Europe during World War I. Examining the martial race discourse that imagined Indian soldiers as unquestioning loyalists for empire, I argue that the men of the Indian Army was not able to make free decisions in their military migration to Europe. I examine the theoretical arguments for examining the Indian soldiers, sepoys, as migrants, and the gap in migration literature dealing with the colonial soldier as a migrant. I then look into circumstances of coercion and surveillance that compromised the agentic power of the Indian sepoys across their transportation and sojourn in Europe. In particular I examine British military hospitals and German prisoner of war camps as sites under which colonial soldiers were given care for propaganda purposes, kept confined and under surveillance, and their loyalty actively sought. The experience of the Indian army migrating to Europe was one characterized by an ambivalent degree of unfreedom that puts to rest any simplified narratives of sepoy loyalty.

Introduction

Over the course of World War I, 140,000 Indian soldiers and labourers were deployed to the Western Front by the British Empire.¹ This article explores questions of agency and coercion under the constraints of racialized colonial power across the recruitment, transport, and treatment of these soldiers during their military migration to Europe. The Indian Army was an all-volunteer force described by British observers as having fought in World War I out of a sense of 'izzat' – translated to mean “honour, standing, reputation

¹ 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.

The Sepoy in Europe: Agency and Coercion under Racialized Colonial Power on World War I's Western Front

or prestige.”² Ahuja has criticized scholarship on the Indian Army that takes for granted this “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.”³ Taking for granted this belief in izzat, we can see British sources describe the motivations of Indian soldiers during the war in terms of unquestioning loyalty:

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.⁴

Indian soldiers – sepoys – ‘willingly and cheerfully’ fighting for the British Empire during World War I reproduce the dominant trope that underlies representations of the colonial Indian army, that of martial races defined by their chivalrous, honour-based, unquestioning loyalty to the British imperial project.⁵ Martial race discourse is a colonial discourse which produces ‘knowledge’ under colonial power that reproduces colonial power by limiting the ways in which the subject – in this case the Indian sepoy – can be imagined; imagined, then, in ways that suit the interests of British colonial power.⁶

² David Omissi, ed., *Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldiers' Letters, 1914-18*, Studies in Military and Strategic History (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire : New York: Macmillan Press, 1999), 12.

³ 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.

⁴ Roly Grimshaw, *Indian Cavalry Officer 1914-15*, ed. J. H. Wakefield and C. J. M. Weippert (Kent: D. J. Costello, 1986), 10.

⁵ Heather Streets, *Martial Races: The Military, Race and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture, 1857-1914* (Manchester University Press, 2004).

⁶ 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), 291-93; Roxanne Lynn Doty, *Imperial Encounters: The Politics of Representation in North-South Relations*, *Borderlines*, v. 5 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 6.

The Sepoy in Europe: Agency and Coercion under Racialized Colonial Power on World War I's Western Front

Martial race discourse makes possible a view of Indian soldiers that reproduces the “oxymoron of voluntary subjugation.”⁷ Not only did the discourse imagine Indian soldiers at the time as being enthusiastic volunteers in World War I – and indeed, fighting on behalf of the colonizing British as ‘honourable’ – but we see its reproduction in modern British war commemoration that insists on the image of Indian soldiers as honourably ‘sacrificing’ themselves.⁸ This ‘oxymoron of voluntary subjugation’ is even starker in the context of World War I, famous for tropes of shellshocked soldiers and of British troops traumatized, lives needlessly wasted in an unnecessary war.⁹ As I have argued elsewhere, British depictions of Indian soldiers during World War I imagined colonized populations fighting enthusiastically in a war that traumatized their colonial masters.¹⁰ In reality, Indian soldiers faced the war with a diversity of motivations and reactions that cannot be neatly explained through the simplicity of martial race loyalty and *izzat*. However, the structures of discourse and stereotype prevented and still prevent critical engagement with issues of agency and coercion in the sepoy experience of the war.

I explore colonial discourse as an exercise of power in the experiences of the Indian sepoy during the War. I begin with the migration of the Indian army to the Western Front, interrogating sepoy agency in their recruitment and transport. Then, I move to two sites that I suggest could be seen to be in thematic opposition: British hospitals for sepoy wounded, and German prisoners of war camps. Friendly hospitals and enemy prison camps, I argue, resembled one another to a surprising degree in that they were both locations of curtailed freedom, where care was provided to sepoys kept under conditions of confinement and surveillance, their acquiescence and support sought by their caretakers and jailors. Across these moments of recruitment, movement and confinement

⁷ Claire Buck, *Conceiving Strangeness in British First World War Writing*, 2015, 13, <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=2057850>.

⁸ Tan Dhesi, “Laurence Fox Must Apologise for Bigoted 1917 Views - 83,000 Sikhs Died for Britain”, *Mirror*, 23 January 2020, <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/laurence-fox-must-apologise-bigoted-21346614>.

⁹ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 25th anniversary ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹⁰ Zoheb Mashiur, “A Very Entertaining Book”: The Ventriloquism of Rudyard Kipling’s *The Eyes of Asia*, *Litteraria Pragensia: Studies in Literature and Culture*, no. 61 (2021): 92.

The Sepoy in Europe: Agency and Coercion under Racialized Colonial Power on World War I's Western Front

I demonstrate that the sepoy experience was fundamentally that of coercion and the illusion of acquiescent agency exercised on behalf of colonial power.

Military Migration to Europe

A shift in the scholarship of World War I has led to a view of it as “an unparalleled period of circulations and exchanges.”¹¹ Christian Koller puts the migration of colonial labour to the Western Front as an unprecedented moment of “transcontinental military migration,” a unique cultural encounter taking place in Europe between colonizer and colonized.¹² The lens of migration has been more and more explicitly adopted by scholars working on the field of colonial labour mobility during the war, with Storm and Al Tuma's recent volume positioned as a contribution to migration studies, using the work of Lucassen & Smit to theorize colonial soldiers on the move as migrants.¹³ Lucassen & Smit are rare examples of migration scholars who have theorized soldiers of any stripe as migrants, and some scholarship has explored the use of soldiers from imperial metropolises as settlers in the colonies.¹⁴ There remains a lacuna, however, within migration studies to cover the specific study of colonial soldiers as migrants, a gap that is being filled by scholars outside the discipline. One of the most important considerations for Lucassen & Smit is the agency of the soldier as a migrant: working within an organizational structure, soldiers have little agency in their movement, which contradicts a shift in migration scholarship that analyzes migrants as exerting considerable agency.¹⁵ Lucassen & Smit argue for the

¹¹ Emmanuelle Cronier and Victor Demiaux, ‘Encountering the Other in Wartime: The Great War as an Intercultural Moment?’, *First World War Studies* 9, no. 2 (4 May 2018): 142, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19475020.2019.1651215>.

¹² 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>.

¹³ Eric Storm and Ali Al Tuma, ‘Colonial Soldiers in Europe, 1914–1945’, 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), 10.

¹⁴ Leo Lucassen and Aniek X. Smit, ‘The Repugnant Other: Soldiers, Missionaries, and Aid Workers as Organizational Migrants’, *Journal of World History* 26, no. 1 (2016): 1–39, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jwh.2016.0024>; Ulbe Bosma, ‘European Colonial Soldiers in the Nineteenth Century: Their Role in White Global Migration and Patterns of Colonial Settlement’, *Journal of Global History* 4, no. 2 (July 2009): 317–36, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022809003179>.

¹⁵ Lucassen and Smit, ‘The Repugnant Other’, 5.

The Sepoy in Europe: Agency and Coercion under Racialized Colonial Power on World War I's Western Front

agency and power of soldiers to enact change in the societies they find themselves migrating to, but the question of agency could be all the more relevant for colonial soldiers such as the Indian sepoys – men recruited by the colonial security apparatus, primarily for the purpose of internal control.

The colonial Indian army was a volunteer force: indeed, the 1.2 million men recruited by the British over the course of World War I was the largest volunteer army in human history.¹⁶ While the volunteer nature of the army cannot be outright disputed, we can raise important and troubling questions regarding the agency of the men who supposedly 'volunteered' for the army. The rhetoric of colonial loyalty and the 'martial races' who comprised the army masks the fact that these martial races were largely drawn from rural, uneducated Indian populations from areas economically dependent upon the army.¹⁷ A mass outpouring of support for the British cause during the war by the Indian intelligentsia was matched by a large recruitment drive in these rural areas, but due to martial race discourse demarcating Indian intellectuals as non-martial and therefore unsuitable for military recruitment the enthusiasm shown by the elites cannot be directly linked to any sense of war enthusiasm or loyalty shown in the rural, martial race communities.¹⁸ Santanu Das explored in depth the recruitment programs in rural India during the war, with promises of material rewards for joining the war effort, coercive measures adopted by recruitment officers to meet quotas as the war wore on (largely due to the manpower demands of the Mesopotamian Front, where the bulk of Indian troops were dispatched after mid-1915), and violent resistance to recruitment.¹⁹ Indian soldiers were also, as argued by scholars studying the small archive of wartime sepoy correspondence that exists, under pressure from the obligation to a sort of 'izzat': the importance of fighting to maintain communal and regimental prestige, itself tied to the

¹⁶ Kaushik Roy, 'Combat Motivations of the Sepoys and Sowars 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), 41, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003142362>.

¹⁷ Streets, *Martial Races: The Military, Race and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture, 1857–1914*, chap. 6.

¹⁸ Santanu Das, *India, Empire, and First World War Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), chap. 1.

¹⁹ Das, 87–92.

The Sepoy in Europe: Agency and Coercion under Racialized Colonial Power on World War I's Western Front

socioeconomic privileges of being martial races fit for military recruitment.²⁰ Das has also elsewhere lingered on the chilling photograph of an illiterate Indian recruit's thumb being pressed down by a white hand to sign his recruitment: an image that does not suggest freedom and agency.²¹ The Indian Army was no stranger to overseas postings, but at the start of the War the Indian Army that was deployed to Europe had not signed on with the expectation of fighting in what was to become World War I.

We can trouble the notion of consent and agency in the recruitment of the Indian soldier, and thereby his agency in his subsequent military migration to Europe, but to do so we have to ask the broader question of consent as it applied to the soldier during World War I. In the scholarly study of World War I, the ability of European – often conscript – soldiers to have consented to enter into the unprecedented industrial violence of World War I is being called into question.²² If colonial soldiers were not migrants because they were not free in choosing to migrate to fight in Europe, but did any soldier, regardless of nationality or skin colour, make a truly free decision to participate in World War I? The transportation of Indian soldiers must also take into account callous attitudes towards the deaths of Indian sailors, such as were recorded by Captain Roly Grimshaw of the Poona Horse – the Indian soldier was seen as more valuable as a life to preserve than a racialized, non-martial sailor, but even these soldiers were not assumed to be worth the same as a white life by the very officers that commanded them.²³

Care and Confinement: Hospitals and Camps

To contrast to the great act of mobility that brought the Indian Army to the shores of Europe, the actual experience of World War I was a relatively static war of trenches and

²⁰ John Soboslai, 'Sikh Self-Sacrifice and Religious Representation during World War I', *Religions* 9, no. 2 (10 February 2018): 55, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9020055>.

²¹ Santanu Das, 'The Singing Subaltern', *Parallax* 17, no. 3 (August 2011): 7, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2011.584409>.

²² 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).

²³ Roly Grimshaw, "'Roly' Grimshaw's Diary, 1914-15", in *Indian Cavalry Officer 1914-15*, ed. J. H. Wakefield and C. J. M. Weippert (Kent: D. J. Costello, 1986), 24-25, 43.

The Sepoy in Europe: Agency and Coercion under Racialized Colonial Power on World War I's Western Front

confinement; trench deadlock, as Sharmishtha Roy Chowdhury argued, stymied imperial power.²⁴ Imperial power was, however, demonstrated through the status of sepoys in British hospitals and German prisoner of war camps, sights that combined ethics of care with confinement under the colonial gaze.

Indian wounded on the Western Front were brought to recuperate in hospitals in Britain. The most famous of these was in Brighton, established in the former Royal Pavilion. The Royal Pavilion was built in an Orientalist style, and the propaganda value of Indian soldiers recuperating under its domes and in its halls made photographs of the site a frequent item in British newspapers, also circulating in Indian press.²⁵ The British approach to the provision of care in Brighton was motivated by “paternalism, pragmatism and desire for further [imperial] prestige... finely blended as medical care became the bedrock of imperial propaganda.”²⁶ The arrangements for Indian soldiers' comfort were extensive, including designated spaces for sepoys to pray according to their religions, and also for the preparation of food that accorded with the rigours of halal slaughter and of caste requirement. These arrangements should at one and the same time be read as a genuine desire for the soldiers to be comfortable, and a calculated propaganda effort to display to the world (not just Indians) that sepoys fighting in Europe were given the best of care by their imperial masters. Propaganda stressing the care given to Indian religious and caste customs especially were a form of proactive defence, with the British paranoid of the propaganda value of seeming to violate such customs.²⁷ These fears of giving fuel to enemy propaganda were particularly important in the wartime environment of the Central Powers actively spreading dissent in India with the collaboration of diasporic Indian nationalists, targeting Indian religious beliefs in particular as a means of stirring

²⁴ Sharmishtha Roy Chowdhury, *The First World War, Anticolonialism and Imperial Authority in British India, 1914–1924*, 1st ed. (London ; New York, NY : Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2019.: Routledge, 2019), 1, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429439025>.

²⁵ 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): 23, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2011.09.002>.

²⁶ Das, *India, Empire, and First World War Culture*, 157.

²⁷ Hyson and Lester, “British India on Trial”, 21.

The Sepoy in Europe: Agency and Coercion under Racialized Colonial Power on World War I's Western Front

unrest in India and of getting Indian sepoys to defect to the German lines.²⁸ These specific wartime fears must also be read in the broader context of pervasive imperial panic over the mood of the colonized populations in India, always assumed to be on the verge of revolt, with the Indian Army a particular source of threat since the supposed religious motivations behind the Mutiny of 1857.²⁹ Proving to the Indian public that sepoys were being well cared for was important to stymie these real and imagined threats to imperial control in India.

The provision of care itself was in thrall to the limitations of colonial knowledge. The correspondence of Indian soldiers produced in the hospitals was closely monitored by British censors for signs of dissent and disaffection, and there are frequent references to mental trauma, resentment over the prospect of being sent back to the frontlines after recovering from wounds (unheard of while serving in colonial India) and the desire to escape military service altogether through self-inflicted wounding.³⁰ Despite this, there has been only one academic study on the subject of mental trauma and 'shell shock' among Indian soldiers. In her article, Hilary Buxton detailed how martial race discourse prevented accurate diagnoses of Indian sepoys' mental health issues, with truisms regarding certain communities' mental attitudes blinding British doctors from closer, independent examination of soldiers.³¹ Between the censor reports surveying the mental attitudes of the sepoys and doctors creating typologies of mental health problems based in the racial classification of the sepoys, the hospitals served as a space of colonial knowledge expansion.

²⁸ Kris K. Manjara, '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>.

²⁹ Harald Fischer-Tiné, ed., *Anxieties, Fear and Panic in Colonial Settings: Empires on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, 1st edition, Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies Series 13937 (New York, NY: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2017); Crispin Bates, 'Introduction', in *Mutiny at the Margins: New Perspectives on the Indian Uprising of 1857 - Volume 1: Anticipations and Experiences in the Locality*, ed. Crispin Bates, vol. 1 (New Delhi ; Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, 2013), xvii.

³⁰ Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*.

³¹ Hilary Buxton, 'Imperial Amnesia: Race, Trauma and Indian Troops in the First World War', *Past & Present* 241, no. 1 (1 November 2018): 221–58, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gty023>.

The Sepoy in Europe: Agency and Coercion under Racialized Colonial Power on World War I's Western Front

Meanwhile, the hospitals were also spaces of literal confinement, and not in the obvious sense of rest and convalescence, prescribed toward men far from their homelands and who often desired to return. Quite literally the hospitals for Indian wounded in Britain were sites of curtailed movement, with their movements outside the hospital closely monitored by the local police and forbidden without a British officer as chaperone. The object of this policing of movement was to prevent the possibility of interracial sex with local women, a key item of paranoia in a colonial regime built on the sexual separation of the races.³² 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.³³ The fears of sexual intercourse were split around class and gender boundaries as well. As Philippa Levine has argued, white, working class women were seen as a danger to a sepoy body constructed in discourse as infantile and needing to be protected from unseemly influence and also venereal disease; meanwhile, the middle and upper-class women represented by nurses were seen as in danger from a rapacious colonial sexuality and needed to be guarded from scandal.³⁴ As such, Indian sepoys were kept strictly away from female nurses in British hospitals, and indeed these female nurses were later removed from these hospitals altogether.³⁵ The provision of care was thus fundamentally beholden to colonial paranoias, preventing contact between white women and non-white men, rendering the celebrated soldiers of empire, wounded in its service, prisoners in hospital.

The actual treatment of Indian soldiers kept prisoner provides an interesting contrast. German prisoner of war camps were, naturally, sites of confinement; however, they were also sites of colonial knowledge production and of targeted propaganda designed to win over the consent and allegiance of colonial soldiers, particularly Indian

³² 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), <http://choicereviews.org/review/10.5860/CHOICE.40-4761>.

³³ Evelyn Berkeley Howell, ‘Censor’s Report’, 19 June 1915, EUR/MSS/F143/83.

³⁴ 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>.

³⁵ Hyson and Lester, “British India on Trial”, 27.

The Sepoy in Europe: Agency and Coercion under Racialized Colonial Power on World War I's Western Front

sepoys. The twin camps of Zossen and Wünsdorf were built to house colonial and primarily Muslim soldiers employed by the entente powers, and one could find Africans rubbing shoulders with sepoys and Tatars.³⁶ These soldiers were given religious facilities such as a mosque and newspapers in their native language, coordinated by the *Nachrichtenstelle für den Orient* (Intelligence Bureau for the East), established in collaboration with Indian nationalists. The purpose of these facilities was to encourage colonial soldiers, particularly Indian Muslims, to rebel against the entente in the cause of international Jihad, with German ethnologists convinced that religious fanaticism underlay the mindset Indian Muslims and could be tapped into in order to cause an overthrow of British colonial power in the East. Elaborate schemes were devised to recruit Indian soldiers in prison to join a joint mission between Turks, Germans and Indian nationalists to convince the Afghan Emir to join the Central Powers and allow Afghanistan to be used as a backdoor for turncoat sepoys to slip into North India and foment rebellion.³⁷ Ultimately these plans would prove futile, the so-called Indo-German-Turco conspiracy falling apart.³⁸ It represented a failure of imperialist knowledge, with ineffective propaganda fuelled by assumptions over the mindset of sepoys, Indian interlocutors' advice ignored in lieu of relying on colonialist assumptions.³⁹ Most Indian soldiers, showing no real interest in the cause of Jihad, were instead used in work sites in Germany and Romania. Despite the ineffectiveness of this propaganda, Indian soldiers who were repatriated to India by the Germans and those ones who were released back to the British frontlines were segregated from their compatriots and thoroughly interrogated, under suspicion of having absorbed anti-British sentiment.⁴⁰ The British authorities were paranoid about the continuation of Indian consent and loyalty, fearing the effects of propaganda; meanwhile, these sites of confinement were for the Germans

³⁶ Das, *India, Empire, and First World War Culture*, 164.

³⁷ Manjapra, 'The Illusions of Encounter'.

³⁸ Raj Kumar Trivedi, 'Turco-German Intrigue in India During the World War I', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 43 (1982): 14.

³⁹ Manjapra, 'The Illusions of Encounter'.

⁴⁰ Ahuja, 'Corrosiveness of Comparison: Reverberations of Indian Wartime Experiences in German Prison Camps (1915-1919)', 152.

The Sepoy in Europe: Agency and Coercion under Racialized Colonial Power on World War I's Western Front

important opportunities to care for and win over the loyalties of their prisoners. A constant battle was fought over the motivations and desires for the sepoys, whereas the sepoys themselves it seemed were much more ambivalent. Sepoys captured by the Germans reported an ignorance of why they had been brought to the Western Front and indeed a lack of awareness of the existence of multiple European powers besides the British.⁴¹

While British debriefs accumulated knowledge from released prisoners, German academics visited the twin prison camps to expand their own ethnographic knowledge, having unique access to the colonial populations of their enemy empires.⁴² The ethnographic laboratory resulted in the creation of a unique archive of audio records of Indian soldiers reciting songs and simply talking, for the benefit of German linguists; Indian soldiers produced art and were allowed to stage festivals, supposedly for their own benefit, but performing under the colonial gaze. These festivals and performances of ethnographic identity, catalogued by German observers, may be placed in the context of the festivals and rituals British martial race theorists identified as specific to various martial races, but were frequently performances by colonized Indian populations to better fit British expectations.⁴³ Indian agency in the war was imbricated by colonial desires for knowledge and control, the reification of strict categories and classifications. Both the camp and the hospital, the site of enemy confinement and paternalist, allied care, grew to resemble one another as spaces designed to co-opt the loyalties of Indian soldiers while denying them free agentic movement, expression and interaction; sites of colonial fascination, where Brighton citizens wished to see the Indians in their midst just as much as German citizens were fascinated by publications and films that emerged using the subjects in the camps as raw material.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Franziska Roy, Heike Liebau, and Ravi Ahuja, *When the War Began We Heard of Several Kings: South Asian Prisoners in World War I Germany* (Social Science Press, 2011).

⁴² Das, *India, Empire, and First World War Culture*, 164.

⁴³ Streets, *Martial Races: The Military, Race and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture, 1857-1914*.

⁴⁴ Hyson and Lester, "British India on Trial"; Ahuja, 'Corrosiveness of Comparison: Reverberations of Indian Wartime Experiences in German Prison Camps (1915-1919)', 154.

The Sepoy in Europe: Agency and Coercion under Racialized Colonial Power on World War I's Western Front

Conclusion

In this article I explored the question of sepoy agency on the Western Front, across their recruitment and deployment to Europe and their eventual twin experiences of hospital care in Britain and incarceration (and attempted indoctrination) in Germany. The Indian sepoy was continually framed by British colonial discourse as a loyalist, but this loyalty was carefully cultivated as a narrative that brooked little possibility for deviance from it, and in the hospital space loyalty was attempted to be bought through the provision of care; while at the same time sepoys were treated as potential sources of unrest and revolt if the caste and religious needs framed by colonial discourse as vital to sepoy acquiescence was unmet, and sepoy loyalty was preserved through the curtailing of opportunities for the supposed danger of interracial sexual liaison. Meanwhile, German attempts at buying the sepoys' loyalties were equally constructed based on their assumptions of Indian ethnology and religiosity, which ultimately failed, and the provision of adequate care in the prison environment was an essential component to the strategy of military propaganda and ethnology. In this respect the experience of the Indian army migrating to Europe was one characterized by an ambivalent degree of unfreedom that puts to rest any simplified narratives of sepoy loyalty.