



## FOCUS

# South Asia and the World Wars in the Twentieth Century: An Introduction

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Most educated Germans knew South Asia through the accounts and activities of European and German missionaries, soldiers, traders and travellers. Most ordinary Germans had some exposure to South Asian exotic artefacts, luxury goods, plants, herbs, and spices thanks to the curiosity of White migrants, traders, and travellers. The majority of the population, however, had no encounters with 'aliens' that inhabited the exotic part of the planet called India until the First and Second World Wars, when 'the empire brought home' captured aliens. During the two World Wars 'aliens' of all skin and eye colours, linguistic groups, cultures and faiths were brought to Europe in the form of colonial soldiers and Black Americans who fought for the Allies. Among them were Africans, Egyptians, Turks, Palestinians, Arabs, Indians (from British India), and so on.

To remember these 'strange foreigners', so different looking and behaving people who fought for the Allies, this year's FOKUS of the South-Asia Chronicle deals with a specific category of these temporary soldier-migrants who were brought to Germany in thousands as captive British-Indian soldiers and camp followers in World War I and World War II. Some of them died in various prisoners of war (POW) camps, sick bays, hospitals, and sanatoria, others survived their ordeals in captivity in various internment camps or Stalags (Stamm-lager, i.e. large POW camps), as they were called in Nazi Germany, where the POWs were registered and distributed to Arbeitskommandos (labour camps) and prisons.

These two periods of great upheaval, violence, and dislocation are witness to the presence of South Asian men in islands of captivity in the heart of the continent not very far from Berlin. They left a huge



amount of archival evidence in their wake not only in Germany but elsewhere in Europe, a substantial part of which still lies unexplored. This archival material was generated in several European and South Asian languages on the 'here and now' basis and is bound to be different from that which was produced in the colony and the metropolis. It adds a fresh spatial and cultural perspective to two rival empires, Britain and Germany as captors, colonisers, and archivists in the crucial first half of the twentieth century, when war and post war eras merged seamlessly in the archiving of knowledge about war, genocide, and normalisation. Dealing with the colonised 'at home' in Europe was not the same as dealing with them in the distant lands in the Orient.

In today's globalised world where spatial boundaries are breaking and cultural distances shrinking, the history of war is being written in social and linguistic terms. The days of drum-and-trumpet military history are indeed over. For those writing on 'New Military History' military strategies, manoeuvres, diplomacy and high politics are no longer attractive. They are interested in the human stories of war, intercultural encounters, rendering speech to the silenced soldier in alien linguistic and cultural surroundings, interrogating the process of recruitment, finding traces of compulsion in the 'voluntary' work soldiers or interned sailors performed in captivity, reading racial biases in 'neutral' command structures, listening to folk songs that marching soldiers or their kin-especially mothers and wives-sang while their hold-alls were being packed, reconstructing their erased everyday lives in camps and labour commandos, and last but not the least, in revisiting war cemeteries for histories of culture, memory, memorialisation and oblivion from the perspective of ordinary soldiers during the two World Wars.

The reader of FOKUS 2015 will find a resonance of some of these issues in all essays. Our claims to write the history of the two World Wars, which were the defining moments of the twentieth century world, might sound preposterous. I must, at the outset, acknowledge that in scope and width our essays are largely limited to the German or European context, in as far as the 'German empire came home' or spilled over to other neighbouring territories. However, in their depth they offer a plethora of evidence relating to the captors' visions, sensibilities, and ambitions that cut across spatial boundaries. The archival material captures a range of desires, emotions and impulses that the presence of aliens awakened in the captors such as empathy, academic curiosity, racial anthropological data-gathering drive, cultivating



friendship with the enemy's subjects and the ambition to fit South Asians into the mould of proverbial German standards.

We hear the otherwise speechless South Asian civilian and jangi qaidis (war captives) recording their testimonies and voices, singing folk songs or rendering their fanciful utterances in prose inside prison camps. We witness them acting before the camera while performing plays or acting for the German entertainment industry. We find evidence of forced labour on German farms, mines and industries, where labourers got little food and sleep. We get to know about their survival strategies in captivity and their negotiation skills when faced with discrimination and selective privileging. We read about how they navigated between the rival claims of the two warring empires during and after the wars; we sense the specific environmental and cultural perils for the South Asian jangi and civilian qaidis. We also discover their small acts of subversion, sabotage, and sexual-racial transgressions.

Each essay of FOKUS showcases a different range of archival deposits in various parts of Germany – in isolated cases also from Britain, India and Geneva – which has been used to recreate the lived experiences of 'alien coloured captives'. All of them in their own ways allude to the dilemmas, anxieties, and confusions that the German officialdom faced during the two World Wars. This resulted in bestowal of several concessions or 'privileges' on jangi qaidis who they hoped to convert to the German cause and their consequent withdrawal if the converts could not prove their worth to their newly acquired friends. Within this short span of time, the authors have outlined phases into which the treatment of jangi qaidis could be divided notwithstanding continued cultural confusions and linguistic misunderstandings.

These acts of the captors smudge the stereotypical image of empire hungry Germans, an image that they earned for themselves through their systemic brutalities inside and outside the Empire, especially so in WWII. Among the South Asian captives, whose countrymen were fighting against their British masters back at home, the Germans saw a golden opportunity to convert as many jangi qaidis as possible to their cause in the name of advancing the cause of pan-Islamism and anti-colonial struggle. The 'camp-scape' of Germany offered German strategists a fertile ground for propaganda warfare and a chance to show the outside world that they could be better colonial masters than the British, even comrades-in-arms.



On one hand they exploited unresponsive combatants, seamen and non-combatants as captive labour for the war industry and agriculture, while on the other they allowed them freedom to practice their religion and respected their dietary specifications that the British failed to do in 1857. They built a makeshift mosque for Muslims in 'Halfmoon Camp' at Wünsdorf Camp (the first ever in Germany), provided places of worship to Hindus and Sikhs, kept copies of the Gita, Quran and other holy scriptures in prison libraries, joined the captives in celebrating festivals such as Dussehra and Eid, ran a theatre company and filmed the actors on camera, taught captives to read and write, learnt their mother tongue, and recorded their prose and songs on the gramophone. Unlike the British, they also organised South Asian warriors in mixed regiments of Azad Hind Fauj or the Indian Legion. The German broadcast from Berlin's Deutsche Nachrichtenstelle (broadcasting station) acquired huge popularity in India during the war years.

The first essay by Christian Koller, "German Perceptions of Enemy Colonial Troops (WWI)", brings to light the charged atmosphere in the world of the press and propaganda in the wake of the deployment of half a million coloured colonial troops in the European theatre of war during and beyond WWI up until the French occupation of the Rhineland in the 1920s. The 'breach of the White solidarity' was castigated as a crime against European civilisation. The colonial soldiers appeared in German texts and pictures as beasts and cannibals. Under this upper layer of brazen racist propaganda and horror, lay another layer of curiosity towards the aliens, which could be discerned among the learned and laymen alike. Koller analyses this swing of the German pendulum between racism and exoticism through an analysis of the public sphere during WWI.

The fear of the unknown that Koller encounters in the vivid descriptions of the cruel Gorkhas or Sikhs, however, was not specific to Germany alone. Back at home, in South Asia, this fear resonated in the realm of orality, as literacy was not so widespread in the recruiting grounds for the British army. While you find it openly aired in the German media and the accounts of German soldiers, in British India it circulated through wartime folk songs that was routinely sung in gatherings. One such Garhwali song sung by a marching soldier during WWII to his mother mourns the world he is leaving behind: the world of kith and kin, his new born baby, his house and hearth, his newly wed brothers and their brides and so on. The song "Saat sumendar paar cha jaandu Ma, jaaj ma joulu ki na" (O mother, I have to travel



beyond the seven seas, will I board the ship or not?) at one point brings out the fear of the Germans in the following lines:

Ladaiy maan joundu German paasu, ankhon ma aundan bada bada aansu, bada bada aansu maa, jaaj ma joulu ki na? (I have to confront the Germans in the war, (just the thought of which) brings big tear drops in my eyes. Big tear drops well up in my eyes, O mother, will I board the ship or not?).

Mahmood Awan similarly cites a folk song about a dead soldier's mournful Punjabi mother who wails:

Khanbh khuss ga'ay kaawan day, bass kar Germana, bachay kuss g'ay māvāan day (Crows have lost their feathers. Germans: Stop butchering now; our sons are already dead).<sup>1</sup>

Arguing that the British coloniser threw these untrained peasant boys knowingly straight into the jaws of death by exposing them directly to the vastly superior Germans and their lethal weaponry, he says that mothers pleaded repeatedly in the folk songs for mercy:

Sarkaan tay jandyaan ni, bask kar Germana Bhai rya, Ghar Ghar Randyaan ni. (Trees by the roadside, wicked Germany, stop the war. There are widows in every household).<sup>2</sup>

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Roy's essay "Indian Seamen in World War I Prison Camps in Germany" offers us glimpses of the microcosm of German 'camp-scapes', albeit in the context of civilian internees during WWI. It enriches our understanding of the camp-scapes and the structures that were constitutive in forming the internees' experiences and how these were later communicated to those outside the camps during and after the war. The shifting hierarchies and networks in the camps, the tension between German expectations of prisoners' and the latter's own tribulations, as well as their conscious adaptation to and subversion of German official knowledge about them are concerns that would resonate across the two World Wars in terms of life in captivity as well as its remembrance for posterity. In Roy's essay, one meets intermediaries, interpreters, propagandists, camp leaders and others who helped Germans with the management of camps. These people were described as collaborators in the testimonies of laskars who were mistreated and exploited by these enthusiastic actors in their lot. Her use of the testimonies of soldiers and the letters of petition create a canvas of self-narratives that captives left behind during and after the war.



Britta Lange's contribution "When the War is Over, Many Stories will be Published: South Asian Positions and European Research in Halfmoon Camp" brings to light the archival material that was created during WWI in propaganda camps such as Halfmoon Camp, at Wünsdorf. This camp site became a melting pot for military strategy, propaganda, scientific research, entertainment, and linguistic curiosities. It served as a laboratory for curious linguists and entertainment companies. Her empathetic treatment of the utterances of British Indian soldiers into the funnel of the gramophone, and her penetrating analysis of ethnographic research done by German academics allures polyglot South Asians to reread and reinterpret this unique collection of Lautarchiv (sound archive) housed at the Humboldt University from a South Asian perspective.

Many of the strategic issues highlighted in Roy's and Lange's essays can be seen in the contributions on WWII alerting us to continuities between the two wars. Most of these lie in the realm of propaganda politics but a few go beyond that. Some of these are the dependence on the kin to discipline, instrumentalise, and mould the non-converts to the German war aims, the pro-Islamic stance towards Muslim captives across national barriers and the anti-colonial stance towards South colonial captives, the infantilisation of coloured soldiers, the claim that captives, whether civilian or POWs, worked voluntarily, and so on.

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In the context of WWII, archival evidence on historical-anthropological exploits by the captor is sparse. We know that the Nazis devised a category of 'brown Aryans', which they applied to Indians, but more search needs to be done to find such primary sources. What we do know, however, is that the Nazis built on previously existing 'expert' knowledge in various fields that they were able to cash on during WWII. We know that they did not have to revamp the secret police and other surveillance agencies of the 'prerogative state'; there were no great purges in the Gestapo, police and judiciary to silence the opposition and create an atmosphere of consent in Nazi Germany. The cogs in the wheel knew how best to run it in the interest of the regime, and they knew if they worked against the wish of the Führer they would be replaced quickly.

For the South Asian island in Germany, which was in Annaburg, the Nazis utilised the know-how, skills and expertise of university professors, linguists, anthropologists and diplomats who had a history of engagement with South Asian peoples in and outside of Germany.



Germany offered refuge to fugitive revolutionaries such as the Gadarites and anarchists during WWI and the 'misguided patriots among the patriots' as Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi described Subhash Chandra Bose (respectfully named Netaji) the future leader of the Indian National Army (the above mentioned Hind Fauj Azad). Apart from these disenchanted Congressmen, the Nazis were also interested in initiating a dialogue with mainstream nationalist leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru. Several rebel nationalist leaders played an important role in shaping German war strategies against the British.

What can be considered a remarkable advance on Germany's previous engagement with South Asian colonials is that the Nazis were actually able to raise an army of defected warriors under the leadership of the nationalist and rebel Congress leader Netaji Bose. After Netaji's one-year visit and departure from Germany in 1942, others continued the work of recruitment and cooperation and German Wehrmacht trained the Indian League soldiers. Wartime politics of making 'freedom fighters' out of captive British Indian soldiers, although minuscule in its military impact, went a long way in fostering diplomatic relations between post-colonial India and post-war Germany.

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Drawing on his archival findings on the Military Prison in Annaburg Torgau, Kuhlmann argues in "Die Indische Legion im Zweiten Weltkrieg: Interkulturelle Menschenführung zwischen Atlantikwall und Wehrmachtsgefängnis" that the Indian Legion soldiers enjoyed more freedom than the regular German soldiers at least in the initial years of recruitment and training. They were more defiant and rebellious than German soldiers and came in conflict with military courts on several grounds. Their disrespect towards German military discipline and open defiance against the military dictates were ignored or taken lightly by the Wehrmacht. This happened until they were being organised and trained. Once, however, the possibility of sending them to the front became real, the official attitude changed. The legionaries who refused to go to the front were robbed of their freedom for several years. They were awarded death sentences for crimes of violence, which were still limited in number. From 1944 onwards, the disciplinary regime showed its true colours and those who were found to have indulged in arson, loot and rape of civil populations, especially during deployment in France were executed to appease the locals. Desertions were equally severely punished.



Oesterheld's article "The Last Chapter of the Indian Legion" takes us directly to the frontline in France where three battalions of legionaries were stationed to guard a stretch of about 50 to 60 kilometres of the Atlantic Wall along the Gulf of Biscay between mid-1943 and late 1944. He uses the archival material available at the Military Archive of Freiburg to reconstruct this phase of the Indian Legion in action. He enriches his account by incorporating experiential narratives of erst-while German and Indian legionaries, which are available as publications, to lend an added subjective dimension.

Jürgen Nagel's essay "Years of Radicalisation: The Impact of World War II in South and Southeast Asia" does not discuss the military strategies and manoeuvres in the zone, but focuses on the impact the war had with regard to its ideological implications and strategic cooperation on the process of decolonisation. It is seen to be working as a catalyst in this process. He concentrates on nationalist and communal discourses within which the question of radicalisation has been located and analyses the impact of Islam in the British and Dutch colonial empires. In this way the article goes beyond the boundaries (and confinements) of the German and British empires re-setting the global war in an appropriate context.

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Joshi's essay "Between Erasure and Remembrance: Shreds from the Lives of South Asian Prisoners of War in Stammlagers, Arbeitskommandos, Lazarets and Graves During WWII" is more about listening to the silences than recording the spoken word. It brings to light archival material from the International Tracing Service and International Red Cross, among others, on South Asian captives scattered all over Germany who refused to volunteer for the Indian Legion, and worked as forced labour in the war industry and agriculture or died. The accounts of these captives from the European continent may find a universal echo in the experience of slaves, indentured labour, and POWs elsewhere who worked and died in alien environments. We routinely hear of migration stories from the Anglo-American world. Such stories, when they are archived in Europe are far more difficult for Anglo-American and post-colonial scholars to access due to their limited linguistic abilities. This essay builds a small bridge between two scholarly contexts.

Put in the global context of the current trends of history writing, one would concur that the empire is coming back, but in a different avatar. The canvas this time is not being painted in broad strokes, but in a pointillist way, whereby small dots arranged in a fragmented manner





allow the reader to derive his or her meaning out of the impression being created and the clues it hides for future research agendas. The parade of the Grande Narrative is over. This applies as much to the grand empires as to their grand armies, grand war strategies, great charismatic leaders and grand events that used to make history. It is about historians asking the British government what they are hiding in their secret colonial archives in the heart of London. It is about British feminist scholars such as Sonya Rose, Antoinette Burton and Philippa Levine interrogating their feminist foremothers' involvement in the Indian social reform movement. It is about fragmenting and hyphenating British feminist identities as imperialist-maternalist and patronising. It is about asking nation-empires uncomfortable questions from the perspective of ordinary people who constituted it. It is about looking inside the cracks of cohesive structures of nations, empires and armies.

Whose nation, whose war, whose empire, whose victory, whose history, whose memory and memorialisation, these are some of the questions being asked by the historians of empires. It is thus about questioning the British government on raising an exclusive Sikh battalion in the UK to reward the Sikhs for their loyalty during the Raj. Curiously, the Germans who were trying to raise the Indian Legion without much success heaved a sigh a relief when a transport carrying several Sikhs arrived in Annaburg and they voluntarily offered to join the Indian Legion. This is a good time to do global history, a global history of every-day life that investigates social practices, and looks for contradictions and embarrassments that wars created and that were best forgotten once the war was over.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> <http://tns.thenews.com.pk/punjabi-soldiers-on-the-war-front/#.VfgUcPmSzjt>  
[Retrieved 15.09.2015]

<sup>2</sup> <http://tns.thenews.com.pk/punjabi-soldiers-on-the-war-front/#.VfgUcPmSzjt>  
[Retrieved 15.09.2015]