

# Historiographic Approaches to the Sikh Participation in WW1

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## Abstract

War as a phenomenon and experience leaves indelible mark on the mind, body, psyche and hearts. At the time when one in every seven Punjabis was being recruited, and sent overseas to an almost certain fate- death or at least grievous injury, it is reasonable to assume that almost all would carry the scars of war on their psyches. Much has been written about the trenches and how the soldiers lived and died, but a very little has been written, said and even thought about the human aspect - cultural, social, religious and familial aspects. As to how the soldiers coped with the horrors and deprivations of war and how it impacted the soldiers, non-combatants, families, children and society at large are the issues which need to be examined.

The social history of any community and nation is a huge part of its heritage. The Sikh soldiers could not help but be touched by the forces that were at full play. The willingness and loyalty of the Sikhs to the British at the time of the Great War provoked wonder then, and still remains a matter of some debate. The participation in the Sikh soldiers in First World War makes the understanding better of policies and programmes of imperialism, colonialism and nationalism and merits a deeper and more comprehensive re-examination than it has hitherto received.

**Keywords: Sikhs, Soldiers, War, Socio cultural history.**

## In the footnotes of history- Sikh *Sipahis* of First World War...

‘The colonial soldier is and was ordinarily distanced from civilian life’, says Samuel P. Huntington in his seminal work, *The Soldier and the State*.<sup>1</sup> This perception is echoed by the Israeli diplomat Amos Perlmutter<sup>2</sup> and Sam Finer, with minor qualifications. All three agree that the soldier has a larger role to play in socio-political milieu and has a deeper involvement than is evident on the surface. This is a generalist view, but can it be applied to the Sikh *Sipahi* of the First World War?

<sup>1</sup>Samuel P Huntington (1964). *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil Military Relations*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Perlmutter, Amos (1981) *Political Roles and Military Rulers*. Totowa, N.J

There is a wave sweeping the globe concurrently, which views military history in the broader social, political, economic and cultural context. This 'New Military History' considers armies, soldiers and warfare in the larger social and cultural milieu and attempts to view battles, their participants, their results and the outcomes as events and experiences which emerged from a wide social-cultural-political subtext and also result in socio-cultural changes in addition to the obvious 'military and political outcomes'. This dynamic and innovative relook and reassessment of the past leads to new insights into events and subsequent consequences, that succeeds in making the narratives richer, multi-layered, contextual and pertinent.

In the words of Peter Karston, 'old' military history was concerned with 'campaigns, leaders, strategy, tactics, weapons and logistics'<sup>3</sup>. The 'new military history' represents

A full-fledged concern with the rest of history- that is fascination with the recruitment, training and socialisation of personnel, combat motivation, the effect of service and war on the individual soldiers, the veteran, the internal dynamics of military institutions, inter and intra- service tensions, civil- military relations and the relationships between military systems and the greater society'<sup>4</sup>.

Historians such as John Ferling<sup>5</sup> have claimed that religious impulses provide strong motivation for recruitment in the American context (early colonial era) but were replaced by more ideological and political reasons by 1775 in America. F.W Anderson<sup>6</sup> has shown how colonial New England soldiers fighting against the British were the younger sons of the farmers who had no claim to the hereditary lands and saw the army as a means to etch out a respectable livelihood. Charles Royster has rejected this purely economic reasoning<sup>7</sup> and contested that for the continental Line soldiers, 'their willingness to fight' was the primary motivation<sup>8</sup>. Many other historians such as Marcus Cunliffe, Richard Buel, Robert Gross, Gregory Stiverson and Mark Lender have also given alternative thesis to try to unearth the main motivations behind the soldiers' willingness to enlist in armies when the outcomes were very doubtful and the fighting was hard<sup>9</sup>.

The current study has been undertaken in a similar spirit of exploration. In the light of these researches and perspectives to view soldierly conduct and participation in wars, this study attempts to view the Sikh participation

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<sup>3</sup> Bourke J. (2006) New military history. In: Hughes M., Philpott W.J. (eds) Palgrave Advances in Modern Military History. Palgrave Advances. Palgrave Macmillan, London. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230625372\\_14](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230625372_14)

<sup>4</sup> Karsten, P. (1984). The "New" American Military History: A Map of the Territory, Explored and Unexplored. *American Quarterly*, 36(3), 389-418. doi:10.2307/2712740

<sup>5</sup> John Ferling (1980) *A Wilderness of Miseries: War and Warriors in Early America*. Greenwood, Westport

<sup>6</sup> F. W Anderson (2000) *Crucible of War: The Seven Years' War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754-1766*. Knopf, New York

<sup>7</sup> Charles Royster (1979) *A Revolutionary People at War. The University of North Carolina Press, reprint 1996 ISBN 978-0-8078-4606-3*.

<sup>8</sup> Royster, C (1991). *The Destructive War: William Tecumseh Sherman, Stonewall Jackson and the Americans*. New York: Knopf.

<sup>9</sup> Karsten, P. (1984). The "New" American Military History: A Map of the Territory, Explored and Unexplored. *American Quarterly*, 36(3), 389-418. doi:10.2307/2712740

in the First World War in the light of ‘new military history’. The humble aim is to contribute to the understanding of the various motivations, methods, encounters, incidents and experiences that lead the Sikh soldiers to sign up for the British Indian army, their experiences abroad and their role in the wider social, cultural, economic and political milieu.

### **Historiography Trends about the First World War**

The world as it was in 1914 when the war was declared was at the cusp of the modern age. At the centre lay Europe, a small continent whose people nevertheless dominated the other continents and people with effortless ease. At the centre of Europe, though not geographically, lay the islands of ‘Great Britain’, which controlled an empire of 444 million people and 12.7 million square miles of territory in commercial, industrial, financial, maritime and industrial fields<sup>10</sup>. Alongside, across the English channel lay France, which was heavily industrialised and was making its presence felt in the newly emergent automobile and aviation industry, although its population was stagnant at 39 million residents. The Eastern neighbour of France was a resurgent Germany, whose surging population of 70 million was driving it towards industrialisation, especially in Iron and Steel and other technology-driven chemical and electronic industries. ‘The German Emperor relied on his army and officer corps to hold together a sprawling realm of more than a hundred different nationalities and ethnic groups<sup>11</sup>. In this potent mix was also added the ‘realist’ or scientific doctrines’, that applied ‘Social Darwinism’ and ‘Scientific Racialism’ and perpetuated a chauvinist and superiority nationalism that was bound to bring the various nations into conflict with each other<sup>12</sup>.

In such a scenario, empire became a prized possession which had to be guarded, exploited, expanded and even traded to perpetuate one nation’s superiority. ‘a seamless web linked the mother country to the imperial possessions’, and in fact the British connection with India led many to believe that there were two centres of British wealth and strength<sup>13</sup>. Lord Curzon remarked in 1901, “As long as we rule India we are the greatest power in the world. If we lose it we shall drop straight away to a third rate power”<sup>14</sup>.

Popular and scholarly interest in the First World War is multidimensional and this period continues to be the subject of numerous studies. The much studied and written about historiography of this conflict has gone through three phases. From the war’s onset through the commencement of the Second World War, the focus was on military and diplomatic matters and the victors wrote much of the history<sup>15</sup>, underlining their own greatness and imperial strengths and undermining the abilities and ambitions of the defeated. The British Empire at war was a

<sup>10</sup> Herrmann, David (1995) *The Arming of Europe and the making of the First World War*. Princeton University Press

<sup>11</sup> J. H Morrow (2017) *The Imperial War* Routledge pg 3

<sup>12</sup> J H Morrow *the Imperial War* pg 4

<sup>13</sup> J H Morrow *the Imperial War* pg 6

<sup>14</sup> David Reynolds (2014) *The Long Shadow: The Legacies of the Great War in the Twentieth Century*. Norton, New York

<sup>15</sup> Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction: Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

subject used to glorify and decorate the annals of British Imperial scholarship and might, with matters of diplomacy staying the centre<sup>16</sup>.

The development of the Third Reich and the consequent division of Europe into two polarized blocs, shifted the historical agenda away from matters of war origins to war aims, stressing above all the primacy of domestic politics. Fritz Fischer in his pioneering work, *Griff nach der Weltmacht*, argued that Germany deliberately provoked a world war in 1914 in order to secure hegemony in Central Europe<sup>17</sup>. There was a battery of scholars who also took a subaltern look at the impact of war on society from the bottom up. The experiences of soldiers and the home front were delved into at great length.

The much acclaimed works of Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975)<sup>18</sup> and John Keegan's *The Face of Battle* (1976)<sup>19</sup> were the harbingers of the third shift- one that focused on the impact of war on society and culture. European wartime experience and their contribution in shaping the culture of collective memory, oral and cultural memories and even individual experiences lead to the exploration of new terrains. New questions and methodologies were introduced and the role of the sepoy who fought in Europe during the First World War was unfortunately lost in the margins and confined to footnotes.

Historians of the past made only passing reference to Indian participation in the First World War. Keegan writes of the landing of the Indian soldiers in France, "Though they included a high proportion of Gurkhas, (they) were scarcely suitable for warfare in a European winter climate against a German Army. Once stalemate set in along the length of the Western Front, they offered nothing more than barbaric flurries of slash and stab"<sup>20</sup>.

Even Alistair Horne in his acclaimed account of the Battle of Verdun succumbed to rehashing early twentieth century racial stereotypes about Colonial soldiers, calling them, "brave to the point of fanaticism on the attack, but strongly subject to temperament and less consistent fighters than the more dogged northerners"<sup>21</sup>.

The early 1990's witnessed a shift, however, into a fourth historiographical configuration, that views the Great War in a more comprehensive, egalitarian and global perspective, with works by authors such as Hew Strachan, John H. Morrow, Jr., Michael S. Neiberg, William Kelleher Storey, and Lawrence Sondhaus<sup>22</sup>. *Race, Empire, and*

<sup>16</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, —The World War and the Color Line, *The Crisis*, November 1914, 28- 29. 10 Sir Charles Prestwood Lucas, *The Empire at War*, Vol. 5 (Oxford University Press, 1926).

<sup>17</sup> Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1967), first published as *Griff nach der Weltmacht* in 1961. in Andrew Tait Jarboe (2013) *Soldiers of Indian Empire Sepoys in and Beyond the Imperial Metropole during the First World War, 1914-1919*; North Eastern University

<sup>18</sup> Paul Fussell (1975) *The Great War and Modern Memory*. Oxford University Press, Oxford

<sup>19</sup> John Keegan. (1976) *The Face of Battle*. Penguin Books, New York

<sup>20</sup> John Keegan (1988) *The First World War* (New York: Vintage Books, pp 130, 182

<sup>21</sup> Alstair Horne. (1993) *The Price of Glory: Verdun 1916*. Reprinted New York: Penguin Books, 1993, pp 100-101.

<sup>22</sup> Hew Strachan, *The First World War* (New York: Viking, 2003); and *The First World War: Volume 1: To Arms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) and *The First World War in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); John H. Morrow, Jr., *The Great War: An Imperial History* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Michael S. Neiberg, *Fighting the Great*

First World War Writing (2011), edited by Santanu Das, examines how colonial ideologies and ideas about race influenced wartime encounters between colonisers and colonised in nearly every theatre of the war. Non-chronological, non-geographical, and non-topical approaches are preferred in these global histories<sup>23</sup>. In World War I (2013), editors Andrew Jarboe and Richard Fogarty argue that in order to recapture imperial dimensions that were readily apparent to the war's contemporaries, historians of the conflict must regard the globe as an interconnected, if unequal, whole<sup>24</sup>.

An increasingly growing series of journal papers, edited volumes, and monographs are studying the encounter between Europeans and colonial subjects in Europe. Christian Koller used British, French, and German sources to study the deployment of colonial soldiers. He demonstrates that Europeans on opposite sides of the no-man's-land shared racist beliefs<sup>25</sup>. Philippa Levine has employed both race and gender as categories of historical analysis to show how the deployment of Indian and African men to Britain during the war led to race specific and alarmist policies<sup>26</sup>. This alarm was shared by French authorities across the border as shown by David Omissi who has used the letters of the Indian soldiers themselves (housed at the British Library) to illustrate how they were aware and shrewd observers of the milieu around them<sup>27</sup>. The authorities in Europe where colonial soldiers were meeting white women were concerned and took steps to control the movements of colonial soldiers and working-class white women.

Much was written about the Indians in France right after the culmination of the Great War, but mostly by British Indian Army officers and not qualified historians. The officers had a patently clear motive- to glorify Empire, Imperialism, their role in it as the protectors and defenders of the Empire and the accounts of the battles were written in this vein. The self serving motives, patent intentions to cover themselves in glory on hindsight as dashing officers who lead their hordes from India to victory against the nefarious 'enemies of civilization' were

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War: A Global History (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); William Kelleher Storey, *The First World War: A Concise Global History* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010); and Lawrence Sondhaus, *World War One: The Global Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Santanu Das, ed., *Race, Empire and First World War Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). See especially contributions by Claude Markovits, Ravi Ahuja, and Santanu Das.

<sup>24</sup> Andrew Tait Jarboe and Richard S. Fogarty, eds., *Empires in World War I: Shifting Frontiers and Imperial Dynamics in a Global Conflict* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

<sup>25</sup> Christian Koller, *Von Wilden aller Rassen niedergemetzelt: die Diskussion um die Verwendung von Kolonialtruppen in Europa zwischen Rassismus, Kolonial- und Militärpolitik, 1914-1930* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2001). Also see: Koller, —The Recruitment of Colonial Troops in Africa and Asia and their Deployment in Europe during the First World War, *Immigrants & Minorities* 26. ½ (March/July 2008), 111-133

<sup>26</sup> Philippa Levine, —Battle Colors: Race, Sex, and Colonial Soldierly in World War I, *Journal of Women's History* 9.4 (Winter 1998), 104-130.

<sup>27</sup> David Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldiers' Letters, 1914-18* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 1. See also a recent article by Omissi, —Europe through Indian eyes: Indian soldiers encounter England and France, 1914-1918, *English Historical Review* CXXII/496 (2007), 371-396.

quite clear to the discerning reader. The two accounts that amply exemplify this tendency are General Willcocks<sup>28</sup> and Lt Col J.W. B Merewether and Sir Fredrick Smith<sup>29</sup>.

The next sixty years were spent in silence on the role of the Indians in Europe and in the Great War in General until the cat was let among the pigeons in 1980's by a series of articles by Jeffrey Greenhut. Greenhut opined that the Indian corps in France was a 'history of failure', and the Indians were largely unnerved by the methods of warfare and their contribution was minimal. There are three main works in which Greenhut puts forward this contention, couched in different words<sup>30</sup>. Greenhut lent credence to the assumption that the British officer corps were endemic to the performance of the Indian soldiers and the devoted soldiers were ready to follow their officers to assured death, just because of the close bonds, admiration and hero worship which the British officers were able to inspire in their colonial soldiers.

The scholarly reactions to Greenhut's work have generated a small body of work on the role of the Indian soldiers in particular on the European front. Historians such as Byron Farwell have accepted Greenhut's hypothesis<sup>31</sup>. Other historians have presented a contrary picture. These include the works of Gordon Corrigan, David Morton, Robert McLain, David Morton Jack, David Kenyon, Santanu Das, Kaushik Roy<sup>32</sup>, Gajendra Singh and David Omissi<sup>33</sup>.

In fact, David Omissi and others have established that the British officers were not as venerable and exalted in the eyes of their soldiers from India as imagined, the soldiers themselves were not as insulated and unaware as they are etched and the narrative till now has been biased in the favour of the accounts of the ones that have told the accounts. Many authors have asserted that Indian soldiers were neither better nor worse than the European

<sup>28</sup> James Willcocks, *With the Indians in France* (London: Constable and Company LTD., 1920)

<sup>29</sup> Lt. Col. J.W.B. Merewether and Sir Frederick Smith, *The Indian Corps in France* (London: John Murray, 1918)

<sup>30</sup> Jeffrey Greenhut, —The Imperial Reserve: The Indian Corps on the Western Front, 1914-15, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* XII (1983), 54-73.

Jeffrey Greenhut, —Race, Sex, and War: The Impact of Race and Sex on Morale and Health Services for the Indian Corps on the Western Front, 1914, *Military Affairs* 45. 2 (Apr., 1981), 71-74.

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. 1 (Jan., 1984), 15-18.

<sup>31</sup> Byron Farwell, *The Gurkhas* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984); and *Armies of the Raj: From the Great Indian Mutiny to Independence, 1858-1947* (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989)

<sup>32</sup> Gordon Corrigan, *Sepoys in the Trenches: The Indian Corps on the Western Front, 1914-15* (Kent: Spellmount Publishers, 1999); Robert McLain, —The Indian Corps on the Western Front: A Reconsideration, *in* Geoffrey Jensen and Andrew Wiest, eds., *War in the Age of Technology: Myriad Faces of Modern Armed Conflict* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 167-193; and George Morton Jack, —The Indian Corps on the Western Front, 1914-1915: A Portrait of Collaboration, *War in History* 13. 3 (2006), 329-362. David Kenyon's contribution makes the claim for the Indian cavalry on the Somme in 1916. See —The Indian Cavalry Divisions in Somme: 1916, *in* Kaushik Roy, *The Indian Army in the Two World Wars* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012),

<sup>32</sup> Amarinder Singh (2015) *Honour and Fidelity: India's Military contribution to the Great War 1914-1918*, Roli Books, New Delhi

<sup>33</sup> David Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldiers' Letters, 1914-18* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

soldiers, but the expectations from the soldiers were much more<sup>34</sup>. The present work is also a humble endeavour in this direction, of shedding light on the experiences of the Sikh soldiers as they encountered Europe and beyond.

The four momentous years 1914-1918, when the stormy gusts of the greatest war till then known to history were blowing gale-like across the globe, the Indian soldiers, especially the Sikh *Sipahis* who were the preferred cannon fodder to be sent across the oceans to the battlefields of the world, seemed to be existing in a vacuum. They seemed oblivious to the radical social, economic and political winds blowing around Punjab at the time, and were ready to sail the seven seas to harken to the call of the British trumpet. In spite of hailing from the province of Punjab, which was amongst the most tumultuous and politically active regions at the time, the Sikh soldier was second to none when it came to loyalty to the British cause. Distant battlefields of Europe, Africa, Asia and beyond witnessed almost 74,000 Indian soldiers who died and 67,000 who were injured,<sup>35</sup> an overwhelming number were Sikhs.

Great Britain declared war on Germany on the intervening night of 4-5 August, 1914 and thus began the First World War. Lord Hardinge was the Viceroy of India and on August 5, he declared that India had joined the war on behalf of Great Britain and mobilisation started on August 8, 1914. By August 24, 1914 the first ships carrying hundreds of Indian soldiers for distant shores to fight on behalf of the British had already left Indian waters from Karachi and Bombay.

### A Socio-Cultural Approach

The First World War was significant for Indians on many counts. First, the war was a chance to win the confidence of their imperial masters. Then it became a platform to demonstrate loyalty to 'King and Country', but as conditions worsened and casualties rose alarmingly, it became a struggle sustained by the thought of reward and concessions. Starting with Mahatma Gandhi, almost every Indian expected the British to recognize, reward and recompense India for her overwhelming sacrifices and unstinting contribution. Of course, there was also an expectation from the British government to grant concession for development of self-governing institutions.

The social history of any community and nation is a huge part of its heritage. The participation in the Sikh soldiers in First World War makes the understanding better of policies and programmes of imperialism, colonialism and nationalism. The Sikh soldiers could not help but be touched by the forces that were at full play. Peter Stearnes, in his article<sup>36</sup>, elaborates on Social History and says that it focuses on large collections or groups of people, such as classes, ethnic groups, races etc., and not on elites and leaders or personalities like the conventional history. Social historians also examine a larger variety of variables and aspects of human behaviour, such as consumerism

<sup>34</sup> Charles Chenevix Trench, *The Indian Army and the King's Enemies, 1900-1947* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 43

<sup>35</sup> Amarinder Singh (2015) *Honour and Fidelity: India's Military contribution to the Great War 1914-1918*, Roli Books, New Delhi

<sup>36</sup> Peter N. Stearnes, (2017) *Social History*, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199756384/obo-9780199756384-0131.xml>

patterns, motivations, leisure, health etc. The focus therefore, is not merely on formal politics, but also on ideas and theories.

Social history is also closely connected to cultural history. Both the phenomenon are intertwined and work together to influence the behaviour, belief systems and thought processes of the individuals involved.

Culture is, of course, a challenging analytical construct, which can be conceived and utilised in various forms; in the wildest terms, as a way of thinking about how human beings make sense of the world but also in much narrower terms in studies of national, institutional and regimental cultures which are sometimes said to produce specific forms of action and behaviour<sup>37</sup>.

In his work, *Lions of the Punjab*, anthropologist Richard Fox<sup>38</sup> gives a biological analogy for the Singhs of the Punjab. Singh, literally translated as lions, is the biological analogy which Fox attributes to the Sikhs of the Punjab to arrive at a better conception of culture. He justifies the use of the analogy of the Lions as a reference to the British orientations and policies and the manner in which they were able to use this identity of the Sikhs to 'master' and 'use' them.

It is incontestable that the First World War was one of the most important events of the twentieth century, that has left a lasting and profound impression on the political, social and cultural milieu of the entire globe. With such a significant contribution to the efforts of the Allied powers in the course of the First World War, it is only befitting that Sikh participation be better highlighted and understood, referencing not only the political and militaristic aspects, but also in the light of the social and cultural aspects. A sincere effort will be made at presenting a cogent and concise study that will chart the course through intensive and extensive research for further advancing our understanding of this area, period and region under study.

War as a phenomenon and experience leaves indelible mark on the mind, body, psyche and hearts. At the time when one in every seven Punjabis was being recruited, and sent overseas to an almost certain fate- death or at least grievous injury, it is reasonable to assume that almost all would carry the scars of war on their psyches. As to how the soldiers coped with the horrors and deprivations of war and how it impacted the soldiers, non-combatants, families, children and society at large are the issues which need to be examined. Much has been written about the trenches and how the soldiers lived and died, but a very little has been written, said and even thought about the human aspect - cultural, social, religious and familial aspects. There is a profound need for a more sensitive, multi pronged and sympathetic relook at the role of the Indian soldiers, and especially the Sikh *sipahis* in the First World War.

<sup>37</sup>Gavin Rand, Kaushik Roy (eds) (2017) *Culture, Conflict and the Military in Colonial South Asia*. Taylor & Francis.

<sup>38</sup>Richard G Fox (1985) *Lions of the Punjab: Culture in the making*, Berkeley; University of California Press



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