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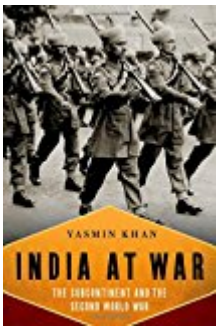
Yasmin Khan. *India at War: The Subcontinent and the Second World War.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 432 pp. $29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-975349-9.



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Yasmin Khan's *India at War* vividly details the myriad ways in which the Second World War affected the lives of millions of people in India: soldiers at the front, noncombatants catering to military needs, ordinary peasants, capitalists, and princes. She sets out to explore the transformative impact of the war after having written *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* (2007), because she argues that the war significantly weakened the British Raj. The experience of war created "a new belief in the power of violence" (p. x). In twenty-three chapters, discrete events and vignettes are bound together by a consistent focus on the transformative effects of the Second World War.

A lot of work is already available on the economic consequences of the war, major battles fought by the Indian Army, the Quit India movement, the Indian National Army (INA), and the famine of Bengal in 1943. Khan focuses on the way in which these dramatic developments affected the lives of people. This is a social history of the war that weaves the information and insights produced by economic and military historians into short narratives and vivid experiences of people as the war progresses from 1939 to 1945.

The war began as a European war that would only entail the mobilization of money and manpower from India. The nationalists were opposed to it but the semi-autonomous Indian princes were eager to raise men and money to gain political leverage. As the war progressed, traditional recruiting areas proved inadequate. A recruit might join "because of hunger, the chance for a steady wage and the opportunity to become a breadwinner for the family" (p. 28). Also young men enrolled to escape "family feuds, domestic violence, unwanted marriage arrangements or strained relations with parents" (p. 29). In Nepal, headmen would send off the poorest and the indebted to the army. Anguished mothers opposed the taking away of their sons—a theme immortalized by a popular Nepalese folk song. According to one Nepalese officer, nearly half the Gurkhas who fought in the war had left their homes "without parental permission" (p. 32). One soldier grum-

bled that he was only enticed by the prospect of eating enough rice and seeing new places: "What did we know about war? Nothing!" (p. 31). India raised one of the largest volunteer armies in the world, but the reasons for enlisting were quite diverse. The contributions of these soldiers and their experience of war—long forgotten—are now being more widely acknowledged.

Premindra Bhagat and Richpal Ram, who represented the newly educated and technically qualified class and the traditional Jat peasant recruit respectively, were the first Indians to receive the Victoria Cross in this war, the latter posthumously. The elaborate ceremony at the Viceregal Palace in Delhi, where these honors were bestowed in 1941, were part of the morale boosting activities adopted by the British during the war. Khan highlights the fact that remaining in touch with their families was very important for the soldiers. Many soldiers remitted most of their salary to their family back home and "fifteen rupees from an eighteen rupees wage was quite typical" (p. 236). The government tried to keep their family members informed in the villages, particularly in the traditional recruiting areas like Punjab where family elders and family traditions exercised considerable control over young soldiers.

There was a growing awareness of and resentment against racial discrimination among Indian officers and men although this was least evident when the troops were in actual combat. Other ranks faced more racial discrimination than Indian officers. Indian soldiers had fewer amenities, lower pay, and smaller rations than British soldiers, and in North Africa (Khan writes) there were even racially segregated brothels. Other hierarchies were emerging too. The arrival of better paid American troops with their "superhero stature" was resented by white British soldiers (p. 151). Further, news of American GIs in Britain consorting with local girls created anxiety about the fidelity of their own wives. As more and more soldiers arrived in India, prostitution flourished as soldiers sought the company of women. Calcutta recorded the highest rate of venereal disease among soldiers during the war.

The war provided opportunities for businessmen to expand production and earn huge profits. Three years after the outbreak of war, India was producing more war supplies than Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa combined. But the scorched earth policy that the British government followed in eastern India in late 1941, even before Japanese forces seemed to threaten an invasion, involved the seizure of boats and rice stocks. These measures deprived the peasants of food and transport and increased mortality during the Bengal famine of 1943. Acquisition of land in many areas for aerodromes and army depots contributed to anger against the British. It also led to patronage and corruption. Mirza Ispahani, a Muslim League supporter, got a contract worth 150 million rupees to collect paddy stocks in 1942. This produced considerable resentment. The proximity of Marwari businessmen like Birla and Bajaj to the congress is well known; Khan points out that the Ispahanis, Habibs, and Adamjees supported the league. Wartime fortunes of these businessmen facilitated postwar growth. She writes, "the foundations for Air India and PIA [Pakistan International Airlines] were being laid on the basis of wartime aviation" (p. 308).

The war created movements of troops, refugees, prisoners of war, labor, and stateless subjects. These resulted in expressions of racial animosities in some cases but frequently led to the weakening of racial stereotypes and barriers. For example, Anglo-Indian and white women began to work in hospitals during wartime and even tended colored troops. The arrival of Polish refugees in India worried Lord Linlithgow who feared it would lower European prestige among Indians. Racial discrimination was widely condemned by nationalist opinion during the flight of over 600,000 Indians from Burma. The Burmese tale of defeat and tragic retreat is far better

known than the stories of African American conscripts among many others engaged in building a 465-mile road to China, the ten thousand Polish refugees housed in camps near Jamnagar and Kolhapur, the three thousand Japanese civilians captured in Singapore and imprisoned in the Purana Qila in Delhi, and Chinese troops secretly receiving training at Ramgarh in Jharkhand as allies of the Western powers (p. 112). The number of Chinese troops swelled to over a hundred thousand by the end of 1944 (p. 272). By pointing toward the presence in India of small foreign ethnic groups and marginalized communities during the war, when huge voluntary and involuntary movements of people took place, this book provides fresh perspectives. The presence of refugees from Greece, Malta, and other countries in Indian ports and cities "added to this sense of a state losing control of its population" (p. 122).

Of the 150,000 American soldiers who came to India about 22,000 were black GIs. Although the British officers thought that the presence of black troops would be "politically inflammatory," black troops housed in the Howrah area of Calcutta not only made friends with the local people but also received invitations to local parties and dances (p. 267). Shared experience of racial subjugation brought Indians and black people together during the war and Khan rightly observes that "race was a weighty issue of wartime diplomacy" (p. 268). Eighty black intellectuals wrote to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt at the time of the Quit India movement in support of Indian independence.

The impact on movement of labor and living conditions was significant. The Burma Road construction "magnetically pulled in labour from around India" (p. 260). The rumor of high wages to be earned there led to a shortage of labor in the coal mines, forcing the lifting of a ban on women working underground. The Ledo Road devoured more than a man for every mile because of overwork and harsh conditions. Although life was often grim, the living standard of the average soldier on active service remained higher than that of the average peasant. "Razor-blades, pen and paper and soap" were among the luxuries they could now afford (p. 226).

Khan makes a case for including the casualties of the Bengal famine of 1943 as part of "the global war dead," like the casualties of Stalingrad and Hiroshima (p. 200). British intelligence reported that a British woman in Calcutta remarked on newspaper photos of victims of concentration camp inmates: "The German atrocities apparently do not compare with the Bengal famine so the pictures didn't shock the folk out here" (p. 299). The government's attempt to marginalize the impact of the Bengal Famine Inquiry Report by publishing it to coincide with the victory celebrations did not entirely succeed. It was the violence before and after partition that truly overshadowed that tragedy.

She captures the complex response of people in Manipur and Nagaland who were caught in the crossfire between the Allies and the Japanese. As part of the policy of denial, the British burned paddy and seized livestock and Japanese soldiers killed livestock for food and fed the harvest to their mules. Although the British highlighted the role of the Chin and Kachin levies and the Naga soldiers, the response of the Meitis, Tangkhuls, and Kukis was "ambiguous" (p. 248). She cites a study that estimates that 148 Kukis from Manipur received pensions as Indian combatants on the Japanese side, and that about 6,000 assisted the Japanese.

Ambiguous and complex responses to rapidly changing circumstances that overwhelmed soldiers and civilians form the leitmotif of this book. Although Khan acknowledges that the INA became very popular after the war and that many in India listened to the radio broadcasts by the nationalist Subhash Bose, she points out that many workers in rubber plantations in Southeast Asia were caught in the "cross-currents of imperialism

and nationalism, with little choice but to join the INA or be used as forced labourers" (p. 218). Indians resident in Malaya constituted half of the forty-three thousand soldiers of the INA. "Indian soldiers often felt far more inner conflict about joining the INA than the local populace, who solidly backed Bose" (p. 119). The boundaries between the Indian Army, the INA, and civilian life were often porous and people moved back and forth. One would welcome more information about what the overwhelming majority of Indian troops who remained loyal to the British during the war thought about the Quit India movement, their own loyalty toward the British, the Bengal famine, the demand for Pakistan, and the future of India.

In this book, we get brief sketches of the role of women nurses, of large-scale prostitution exacerbated by the effects of famine, transnational sexual encounters, and in general, the emergence of a "gendered wartime economy."[1] A more detailed history of army deserters, prostitutes, doctors, industrialists, writers, students, radicals, coal mine workers, peasants, and policemen based on newspapers, memoirs, and more local records would add to our knowledge about the transformative effects of war. That is for other scholars to work on. There may be many ways of writing a people's history of the war in India, but this is surely one of the more readable ways of savoring the "flavor of these plural, and often, hidden voices" (p. xiv). Khan culls facts from a wide range of secondary sources and integrates them with her archival research to produce a comprehensive book that can be read with pleasure and profit by historian and layman alike.

Note

[1]. See Yasmin Khan, "Sex in an Imperial War Zone," *History Workshop Journal* 73, no. 1 (April 2012): 240-258.

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