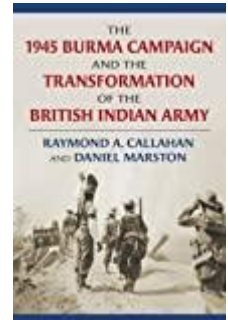


Raymond Callahan, Daniel Marston. *The 1945 Burma Campaign and the Transformation of the British Indian Army.* Modern War Studies Series. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2021. Illustrations, maps. x + 280 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-3041-7.



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If ever there was a war that probably did not need another book written about it, World War II might be a good candidate. Raymond A. Callahan and Daniel Marston enter the fray and beg to differ with a brilliant book on the oft-overlooked Burma Campaign. The clashes of the British and British Indian Army against the imperial Japanese represent some of the fiercest fighting during the whole gruesome war, but they rarely catch the attention of historians intent on rehashing beaches, island hopping, or bulges. Callahan and Marston demand our attention to be recentered on South Asia and the importance of this theater of the war. They make a convincing case.

While the title of this book identifies 1945 as the pivotal year, the book covers much more history than that. The narrative follows a traditional debacle to triumph storyline. The difference is that General William Slim is not at its center. In 1942, Slim oversaw the withdrawal of British forces from Burma back to India in defeat, the nadir of the war in South Asia. But the path to victory was not just due to Slim's determination and

devoted cadre of officers, an oft-repeated narrative due to an overreliance on his memoir, *Defeat into Victory* (1956), for campaign details.

Callahan and Marston take a much broader sweep of the whole international scope of the South Asian campaign. From this lofty scale one begins to appreciate the delicate diplomatic balancing acts between the British and Americans to maintain the much-needed air support for the troops on the ground. President Franklin Roosevelt liked Louis Mountbatten, so against the wishes of many senior officers, British prime minister Winston Churchill put Mountbatten in charge of the South East Asia Command (SEAC). One quickly surmises that the British rarely had the best man to put forward but followed instead a promotion policy of “the man to do the least damage” approach.

As the British Empire frayed at the edges, it required different strategies to fight the war. While the effort can be read as an impressive victory, it can also be seen as one that was a nip and tuck af-

fair. The British found themselves forced to speed up the Indianization of their officer corps. Having suffered heavy casualties in 1944-45, the British brought in the 81st West African Division as reinforcements. One cannot help seeing decolonization around the corner as these troops prop up the floundering empire against a foundering one.

Decolonization becomes a key theme in chapter 6. Where most World War II books end with the signing of the surrender on September 2, 1945, Callahan and Marston carry the story of the British Indian Army into 1946. With this expanded scope of the narrative, the reader sees a nascent United Nations force attempting to smash independence movements in places like Java and Vietnam. One person's freedom fighter is another's terrorist, and the British Indian Army played a role in it. They also experienced even more virulent racism at the hands of the Dutch and French while deployed abroad.

This book excels most as a transnational explanatory guide to the history of the Burma Campaign. It captures the tension of fighting Japanese, jungles, and monsoons. It also explains the internecine conflict within the British chain of command. The gossipy tidbits about Churchill and Mountbatten are particularly delightful.

It will come as no surprise that this is a top-down history. It leaves room for future scholars to fill in some much-needed gaps in the historical literature about the experiences of the Indian officers or the West African troops. It would begin by naming them and proceed with describing their experiences of that war. It would not be simple but would be worth the effort. One could hope that this is in the pipeline at the University Press of Kansas as part of their Modern War Studies series. It would make a fine companion piece to this work.

The book is divided into a preface, introduction, six chapters, and a conclusion. The book is richly aided by a whopping nineteen photographs and three maps. The endnotes are filled with

many helpful sources for further research as well as interesting tidbits. The index is also very useful.

Overall, this is a very good book written by two highly esteemed historians. It is apparent that they are at the prime of their craft and bring this all to bear in this volume. Callahan and Marston are pointing the way to a rich area of study for those who wish to see beyond the well-trod paths of yore.

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