

Soldiers of Empire. By Tarak Barkawi. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 338p. \$74.99 cloth, \$24.99 paper.

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The question of why humans fight has perplexed many over the centuries, with its multifarious implications for philosophers, social scientists, policy-makers, and militaries alike. Napoleon Bonaparte championed the roles of glory and reward, once asking “Do you think that you would be able to make men fight by reasoning? Never. That is only good for the scholar in his study. The soldier needs glory, distinctions, and rewards.” For Tarak Barkawi, in his path-breaking new study of the British Indian Army during the Second World War, the answer is more complex, and less Eurocentric. It is also more rewarding thanks to this study of a multi-ethnic imperial army that transformed itself over the course of the war.

In asking how soldiers are made and why do they fight, Barkawi brings his globally-sensitive approach to an army neglected in traditional narratives of the Second World War, the British Indian Army. Responding to such questions makes this volume ideal for those that these questions interest, be they scholars of International Relations, Sociology, History, or political and military practitioners. Yet whilst historical and sociological in focus, the book is refreshingly difficult to pigeon hole in any specific discipline, and thus its conclusions should be far-reaching. It is also a welcome correction to existing studies of soldier-state relations that rely exclusively on Western case studies, offering instead a glimpse at a truly global force wherein pleas of duty to father- or mother-land would have had a somewhat hollow ring to their multicultural ranks. That a Western society, Britain, was at the heart of such a force and that the force was employed on European soil should raise questions for any advocates of a supposedly “Western way of war.”

At the book’s core is an account of the transformation of the Indian Army during the Second World War, from an initial force of some 200,000 used for imperial policing to an army of millions that swept the Japanese from the dense jungles, steep hills, and dusty plains of Burma, perfected the art of combined arms warfare, and became pioneers in the practice of the air-supplied offensive. This is all the more remarkable for its occurrence in an army of a colonized society that many believed would simply revolt and join the Japanese, and it challenges traditional answers to the question of why soldiers fight. Equally significant is the diversity of the rank and file, with its recruits from across the British Empire. These included East and West Africans, Gurkhas, Sikhs, Gujars, Pathans, the Welsh, Scots, and English from the British Isles, and more. In religious terms, there were Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Christians, and others, necessitating a baffling mix of 30 different scales of rations according to the various cultural-religious sensibilities (pp. 70-1). Barkawi also distinguishes between professional soldiers and wartime conscripts, revealing striking consistencies between the attitudes of professional pre-war British officers and their Japanese counterparts on matters such as surrender (p. 269). Each of the various groups needed to be trained, formed into a single army, and motivated to fight the battle-hardened Axis.

Yet one of Barkawi’s main points of exploration is the Army’s use of these ethno-racial categorizations. As the first part of the three-part book makes clear, many of the categories employed for Indian troops were products of the colonial administration and army’s attempts at divide and rule in the nineteenth century. The “martial races” approach of the British is given due criticism by Barkawi, although not without noting how the army should

be seen as a productive social structure in itself. An army produces very particular forms of subjects and social groups, with an imperial army forced to do so without the discourses of “self” and “other” centered upon the nation common in mono-societal armies. Nevertheless, alternative self/other binaries proved fruitful to the Indian Army by, for example, playing different racially-based units against each other to foster competition, and in recruitment through the Raj’s concentration of recruitment among minority populations. Socio-economic benefits for soldier, family and community accompanied such recruitment, helping ensure loyalty and the appeal of the army despite the war, social unrest, and the Bengal famine of 1943-44. Indeed, whereas British troops in Burma were eager for demobilization and a return home, Barkawi finds that most Indian soldiers wished to remain in service well beyond the war (pp. 92-3). The book’s exploration of such a cosmopolitan army and, crucially, its place in wider politics and society should be instructive to scholars of multicultural societies far beyond military specialists.

The experience of combat on the individual and society is the focus of the second and third parts of the book. One of Barkawi’s major findings is that war itself is a distinct social structure, imposing a degree of change on human subjects and societies equal to if not greater than that achieved through deliberate training and disciplinary practices. “Army life involves common conditions and shared experiences” as Barkawi (pp. 67-8) reminds us, leading to the breakdown of old and the creation of new identities and subjectivities. For instance, the British-Indian authorities tried their best to convince soldiers of the necessity to fight the Japanese through tales of rapes of Indian women and atrocities against religious sensitivities (such as the forced shaving of Sikh POWs’ beards or the feeding of beef or pork to Hindus and Muslims, respectively). It was combat, however, that truly shifted soldiers’ attitudes from “ignorance to hate”, as Barkawi puts it (pp. 231-45), underlining war’s transformative impact on the social forms it encounters. In what was initially one of the most segregated of all imperial institutions, “class” is typical of those categories disrupted by the war, but few (if any) pre-war categorizations escaped having the assumed permanence of its distinctiveness burst by the tumult of war.

It would have been useful for Barkawi to delve deeper into other theatres of war, most notably Italy. There, Indians were a sizable minority in another diverse, albeit predominantly white, Allied army comprised of contingents from the Commonwealth, the US, Italy, the French Empire, Brazil, and a host of “free” forces from various Nazi occupied states. Indeed, the book’s title is somewhat misleading as its main focus is the British Indian Army in India/Burma. Nevertheless, North Africa, where Indian troops also served, provides Barkawi with some of the micro histories he masterly employs to inform his macro socio-political arguments. Such details personalize the analysis in a manner rare for academic texts. They include accounts such as that of the Grand Mufti of Cairo being petitioned to approve a shipment of dried whale meat to the 14th Army in Burma, thus overcoming Hindu and Muslim concerns over the sanctity of the only meat available at one point (p. 73). Such micro histories are weaved into the broader argument, constantly disrupting essentialized orthodoxies concerning social categories, empire, and war itself. With this book, Barkawi unmask the malleability of even the most sacred of social distinctions in the face of war, that most destructive social structure of all. That it has taken so long for such a book to be written on one of the major armies in the Allied war effort war speaks volumes about the entrenched Eurocentricity of traditional perspectives.

