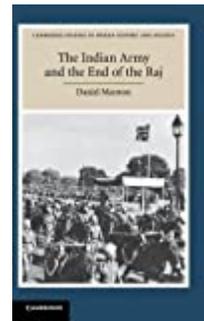


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Daniel Marston. *The Indian Army and the End of the Raj.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Illustrations, maps. 400 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-89975-8.



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Published on H-War (February, 2016)

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Colonial armies unquestionably proved the most durable of all the institutions left behind by the British and French empires. Most postcolonial states (with the notable exception of India) have spent time under military rule. Governments have fallen and states have collapsed, but armies have rarely disintegrated during decolonization. Daniel Marston's careful study looks at a period when the British Indian Army was deeply strained by defeat and yet held together during extreme turmoil. Even more strikingly, it remained cohesive in the face of a partition of its own ranks between India, Pakistan, and a residual British Empire. He argues that the army's role in preventing total societal breakdown during the transfer of power has generally been overlooked or underestimated (p. 5). This story is clearly and effectively told and contains much rich detail and telling anecdotes. Marston has also done the historical profession a service by interviewing a large number of veterans before they and their memories are lost to history.

More than a decade ago, Marston published *Phoenix from the Ashes: The Indian Army in the Burma Campaign* (2003), an important history of the rebuilding of the British Indian Army following the destruction of much of that army during the Japanese conquest of Malaya and Burma. That study examined the rapid changes in

recruitment, tactical training, morale management, and strategy by which the army was reconstructed to cope with new conditions and new enemies, both in Southeast Asia and the Mediterranean. Such steps as commissioning thousands of Indian officers and promoting them to command positions that had been thought hazardous even in the late 1930s were readily undertaken. Large numbers of men from non-martial classes were recruited; enlistments rose to over 2.5 million, a number exceeded only by a few countries in World War II.[1]

Chapters 1 and 2 of this new book recapitulate the findings of the earlier one. The phase of low morale, military retreat, and reconstruction coincided with the Indian National Congress's launch of the Quit India Movement (from August 8, 1942). A massive wave of protests and riots engulfed much of India. Workers in Jamshedpur and Ahmadabad launched long protest strikes, and rail service was disrupted in northern India, straining supply lines to the Assam front. Military units were frequently deployed to aid ... the Civil Power (p. 102). About fifty-seven battalions had to be used for internal security and the army was estimated to have lost six to eight weeks' training (p. 107n298). Marston emphasizes that military discipline largely remained unshaken despite the strength of anti-British feeling in the country at

large and the fact that army and police personnel fired on civilians three hundred times, causing at least one thousand deaths. He suggests that apart from strong counterpropaganda by the army establishment, Indians—especially officers—could in late 1942 perceive the Japanese as an imminent danger to India, so that fighting them was a patriotic duty. On the other hand, officials in London—notably Winston Churchill—were much more suspicious of Indians than Viceroy Archibald Wavell and Victor Hope, the Marquess of Linlithgow, who were actually running the empire in India. Marston concludes that it was the professionalism and *esprit de corps* reborn through battlefield exploits that helped the army maintain its internal cohesion in subsequent years (p. 115).

Marston devotes a long section to the Indian Army personnel captured in the earlier phase of the war who were drawn into the Indian National Army (INA) formed under Japanese auspices and who joined the Japanese offensive into eastern India in 1944. Marston reckons that at its peak the INA contained forty thousand men and women, about half of whom were former prisoners of war (POWs) of the Japanese. Their presence had little effect on the outcome of the campaign, but the trials of captured INA officers in 1945 proved politically dangerous for the government and the Indian Army. Jawaharlal Nehru, future prime minister of India, served as defense counsel for the accused but soon after wrote to Claude Auchinleck, the commander in chief, that everyone who had given the matter thought “realizes fully that it is a dangerous and risky business to break the discipline of an army. It would obviously be harmful to do any injury to a fine instrument like the Indian Army, and yet, at every step till major changes take place converting it into a real national army, we have to face the political issue which governs every aspect of Indian life today” (May 4, 1946) (p. 149). Marston sees this as further evidence of Nehru’s complete lack of understanding of the Indian Army. The army still served effectively in controlling civil disturbances in India and sparing the British forces the task of restoring French and Dutch colonies in Vietnam and Indonesia following the Japanese surrender.

Most ironically, Indian troops under British command had to call in Japanese POWs to help prevent a Viet Minh takeover of major cities. The colonial French maintained their prewar attitudes and had to be admonished by Major-General Douglas Gracey that, without all this help, “there would have been a massacre of thousands of French people.” The French were also warned not to show disrespect to Indian soldiers: “Our men, of whatever colour, are our friends.... They deserve to be

treated in every way as first-class soldiers and their treatment should be, and is, exactly the same as that of white troops” (p. 172). Indian troops, totaling some forty-five thousand, were also sent to Indonesia at the same time, and a series of misunderstandings led to an all-out war with Indonesian soldiers trained during the Japanese occupation. Here, too, Indian forces were maneuvered into fighting to reestablish a Dutch colonial rule that ended a few years later. As late as April 1946, there were two Indian brigades in the Middle East, close to four divisions in Burma, three divisions in Malaya, a brigade in Hong Kong, almost four divisions in Indonesia, one division in Borneo and Siam, and two brigades in Japan (p. 244).

The last three chapters describe how the Indian Army fared as British India spiraled toward a political impasse, religious violence, and division into two sovereign and hostile countries whose armies were carved out of the painfully rebuilt Indian Army of 1945. The end of the war saw the discharge of large numbers of soldiers back into civilian society. Many began training the various party and religious militias that contributed greatly to the brutalities that accompanied the division of British India. The secretary of state for India told the newly installed Clement Attlee that in India everything now depended on “the reliability and spirit of the Indian Army” (p. 203). The load that would be placed on them became evident during the first big interreligious riot in Calcutta (now Kolkata) in August 1946: the police lost heart and the burden of policing fell directly on British and Indian army units: five British battalions and four Indian and Gurkha ones were deployed. Intelligence reports in September declared that the comradeship from recent active service prevented religious fanaticism from breaking military discipline. This pattern intensified in Eastern Bengal and then in Bihar through the later months of 1946 and massive violence broke out in Western Uttar Pradesh soon after. Religious hatred began to seep through governmental institutions. Lord Wavell, the viceroy, observed that “only the army had so far escaped any taint of communalism” (p. 235). But other senior officers were less sanguine about the future: Francis Taker feared that if Punjab where so many soldiers came from burst out, “the chances were that all the mixed units of the Indian Army would burst also and that all of India would collapse” (p. 236). Meanwhile, the demobilization of serving troops continued at a rapid pace, even though reports were coming in stating that demobilized soldiers were prominent in the interreligious violence spreading across northern India. Furthermore, the understandable drive to “Indianize” the officer corps led to the retirement

of many British officers whose skills were hard to replace.

Finally, in April 1947, secret plans began to be made to divide up the army between the future India and Pakistan. Given the mixed structure of many regiments, this proved complicated: for example, 15th Punjab Regiment had twenty-four companies—twelve Muslim, six Sikh, and six Hindu—and ten weeks to divide them between two new armies. Another question was whether officers would choose geographical residence or religious loyalty in deciding which army they would join. Meanwhile, Lord Mountbatten, the viceroy, repeatedly declared that he would not allow the army to be divided as that would be fatal to overall defense. At this point, the date for independence was still June 1948: but as the situation deteriorated Mountbatten pushed it forward to August 15, 1947, and agreed to divide the army as quickly as possible. Marston writes that the chaotic dissolution and reorganization of 1947, occurring in the midst of an interreligious civil war, would have broken most of the world's armies (p. 280). That is however unknowable: not even Ireland (1922) and Palestine (1947-48) are really comparable.

Chapter 7 examines the efforts to maintain some kind of order as the decision to partition India on religious lines sparked genocidal violence. The fact that Calcutta did not explode again is noted and a long section is devoted to the work of the Punjab Boundary Force (PBF), which sought to keep the peace in central Punjab along the new border. The region contained large numbers of ex-soldiers and, in addition to weapons secured during the world war, was supplied with arms from the Indian princely states in the region. The local police not only failed to supply intelligence but also were often found actively fighting on behalf of coreligionists. The PBF units were under-strength with only nine thousand effectives to prevent the inhabitants of seventeen thousand towns and villages from murdering each other. Incidents where soldiers showed religious bias began to be noted and the difficulty in getting soldiers raised outside Punjab province contributed to it. The new regiments, such as the Mahar and Bihar Regiments, functioned the most impartially. Indian political leaders had contributed to the shortage of neutral soldiers by declining not to use such British units as were available. This principle had to be abandoned the month after independence (September 1947) when two British battalions were brought to Delhi to quell violence there.

The normal role of the army was to support a functional civil power. But here, one officer wrote, the "civil

power was ineffective, law and order had completely broken down and the reliability of the troops varied" (p. 335). Marston sums up the situation as asking the army to prevent or contain a civil war erupting among the very ethnic groups from which its own soldiers, officers and VCOs [Viceroy's Commissioned Officers] were drawn (p. 336). In his view, the mutual loyalty of soldiers to their own units was what prevented disintegration during this time. Finally, there remained the question of what would happen to the two hundred thousand soldiers serving the Gurkha regiments—many were discharged and a majority chose to remain in the Indian Army. Those who selected British service were almost immediately sent to Malaya on a counterinsurgency mission. The book ends on an elegiac note with the resignation of Auchinleck from the post of commander of both the Indian and Pakistani armies on November 30, 1947.

Marston carefully describes how the organizational and professional cohesion of the army enabled it to withstand the strains of partition, loss of the majority of its (English) officers, and its own rapid and forcible disintegration into two armies. This conclusion is amply supported with numerous citations. Marston blames religious rifts in the army during the blood-soaked summer of 1947 on political ineptitude and the anarchic violence that engulfed northern India. His own explanation for the professional cohesion of the army invokes unit solidarity derived from recent combat in the new "integrated" army. Obviously, as the detailed account in *Phoenix from the Ashes* shows, this effect itself was the result of many efforts and initiatives beginning in 1942-43. Yet if, as Marston suggests, the new professionalism generated after 1942 mainly explained the nonpolitical cohesion of the army, it would be useful to know why the legatees of the old Indian Army had such different political careers in India and Pakistan. After all, the future dictator Ayub Khan (1958-69) served on Auchinleck's staff, and Zia-ul Haq, who was to overthrow and execute Pakistan's elected president Z. A. Bhutto (1977) and inaugurate a particularly retrograde variety of sharia law, was commissioned into the army during the world war. Can it be that the often flawed Indian politicians, whom Marston consistently derides, did understand something about building a new kind of military out of the remains of the old?

Note

[1]. Daniel P. Marston, *Phoenix from the Ashes: The Indian Army in the Burma Campaign* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 220, 227.

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Citation: Sumit Guha. Review of Marston, Daniel, *The Indian Army and the End of the Raj*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. February, 2016.

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