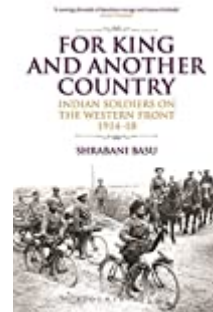


Shrabani Basu. *For King and Another Country: Indian Soldiers on the Western Front, 1914-18.* New Delhi: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016. 256 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-93-8405291-1.



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Indian Soldiers WWI

As a journalist and author of popular nonfiction, Shrabani Basu has an eye for a good story. This proves to be a major asset throughout her impressive new book, *For King and Another Country: Indian Soldiers on the Western Front 1914-18*. Any narrative of India's contributions to the First World War benefits from the dramatic realities of the historical events. Over 1.5 million Indians including combatants and noncombatants served in the conflict, resulting in the loss of over 72,000 dead or missing (p. xxi). South Asians served in all fields of battle—from Singapore to France, Hong Kong to Mesopotamia—although Basu focuses almost entirely, as her title suggests, on the western front. Yet she recognizes that British concerns about sedition and revolution during the war spanned the globe, leading to decisions that contributed to some of the most heated and dramatic events after the war, forever changing the relationship between South Asia and the British Empire. To this well-known series of events, Basu adds a surprisingly detailed and intimate account of several individuals whose lives were forever changed—or tragically lost—by this unprecedented conflict.

The most unique feature of the text is Basu's decision to signpost the work with a series of individual stories. She takes readers along on the journey with many different characters inspired and informed by real-life people whose historical lives have hitherto been confined to names on memorials or official correspondence. She considers some of the thoughts and feelings that may have occupied everyone from Sukha, an untouchable sweeper, to the Ganga Singh the Maharaja of Bikaner—who was among the signers of the Peace Treaty in 1919. She details, with the flair of a novelist, the journey of a Garhwali soldier as he leaves behind his young wife in the hills, and Indra Lal "Laddie" Roy, who left his privileged upbringing in Kensington to become a pilot. Especially gripping is the complex tale of brothers Mir Mast and Mir Dast—one of whom won the Victoria Cross while the other switched sides to the Germans in the hopes of returning to his home on the North West Frontier.

Basu's work is divided into thirteen thematic chapters, which provide a unique lens through which to view

the conflict. The first chapter, "Monsoon," proves an especially engaging introduction. Pulling from the symbolic tension between the relief that rains provide in India and the sense that the First World War was a series of storm clouds gathering, she uses the opportunity to introduce the diverse men and women who populate the book. This chapter opens and closes with a young Garhwali wife as she sees her husband for the last time. In between are the tales of mothers, sweepers, Oxford cricketers, Cambridge boxers, and men destined for infantry and flying corps. Subsequent chapters, including "Brighton," "Bandobast Sahib," and "Comfort Kameti," provide great insight into the range of British official perspectives of Indian troops—which were at times sympathetic and attentive, and at others cautiously skeptical of the men they treated as near-prisoners and would-be mutineers. Of course, some chapters are stronger than others. In "First Blood," the narrative sometimes comes off as a "greatest hits" of the most famous or triumphant stories—usually pulled from regimental reports. Others, such as "Trenches" and "Winter," drift away from the main theme of the chapter, losing focus.

What helps Basu's story throughout is that she not only considers stories from the distant past, but also examines how the war has been remembered. She takes readers from the Chattri memorial in southern England, where Sikh and Hindu soldiers' bodies were burned, to the many graves and plaques commemorating Indian troops in France and Belgium, ending finally with the triumphant statues of individual soldiers that fill squares in India. She even includes numerous photographs of these sights, giving readers the chance to visualize the physical traces of the conflict around the world. In fact, several helpful images—from the postcards sold to commemorate the use of the Royal Pavilion in Brighton as an Indian hospital, to pamphlets and posters of Indian soldiers—provide readers with the opportunity to engage meaningfully with the visual memories of the war. Readers can see how English photographers and audiences hoped to represent and view Indian soldiers—as with the numerous wartime photographs produced for official purposes. At the same time, Basu also provides a unique glimpse into how such men presented themselves, as in the case of "Laddie" Roy, who proudly posed for a headshot dressed as a pilot and even drew his own illustrations of the aircraft he flew.

One of the most valuable features of the text is Basu's use of interviews with soldiers' descendants in India. These remarkable accounts fill in the details of soldiers' lives that are so often absent, missing, or outside

the purview of the immediate concerns of imperial and military record keeping. Striking examples include details about Garhwali soldier Gabar Singh's life before the war, and the life of his widow, Satoori Devi, as she wore his Victoria Cross and carried on his memory when he did not return. This helps to supplement the innovative research of scholars such as David Omissi, whose *Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldiers' Letters, 1914–18* (1999) utilized hundreds of censored Indian letters, a strategy which Basu also employs effectively as well.

One area that could have been improved in the text is Basu's engagement with secondary source literature. Lengthy sections providing seemingly contextual details have few or no footnotes, leaving attentive readers and scholars wondering about—or hoping to learn more—about the source of the information. This proves especially true in sections dealing with Indian sedition during which Basu relays several interesting anecdotes with minimal reference to either archival or primary source texts (pp. 58, 73). In fact, major events such as the Singapore mutiny get little more than a couple of paragraphs (p. 107). One noteworthy absence in this regard is Maia Ramnath's *Haj to Utopia: How the Ghadar Movement Charted Global Radicalism and Attempted to Overthrow the British Empire* (2011), which could have provided ample context about the international anticolonial networks emanating across Afghanistan, India, England, the United States, and beyond. Some of Basu's sources indicate why there are absences in these stories, as she often relies on British and regimental archives, along with military memoirs, slanting the story toward a loyalist account. Engagement with Gajendra Singh's recent work *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars: Between Self and Sepoy* (2014) may have enlivened Basu's analysis of sources by considering the complexities of using colonial archives to convey South Asian soldiers' experiences.

In other ways, one wishes that Basu were more precise in descriptions of certain commonly held misconceptions about the British Indian Army. She occasionally restates the features of the "Martial Races" recruiting strategy, arguing for instance that Nepalese Gurkhas were descended from Rajputs with "a strong mix of Mongolian blood" (p. 30). At other times, she repeats the assumption that all the soldiers were "illiterate" peasants despite later admitting that between ten and twenty thousand letters poured out from Indian soldiers per week (p. 50). This suggests that some, if not many, soldiers were either literate or found it easy to find literate men. While it is true that some men received assistance writing let-

ters in hospitals, it is also true that many learned to read during their time in military service. There are a few moments when oversimplification clouds what would otherwise be powerful moments in the text. This includes Basu's characterization of Udham Singh's assassination of Michael O'Dwyer in 1940 as an act of vengeance against General Dyer's massacre at Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar (1919) events separated by over twenty years (p. 185). A more nuanced picture of the changing dynamics of Punjab, of O'Dwyer's other debilitating policies, and the particular context of the Second World War would have been more convincing, but may have fallen outside of the purview of this work. Without it, however, the story, however interesting, mostly seems out of place.

Nonetheless, Basu's text is such a fascinating read that one may wish that she had not confined herself to the western front alone. A similar analysis of other theaters of war which were neither so well managed nor commemorated, would have added much to her later gesturing toward postwar anticolonialism. It would have been noteworthy to examine why exactly Indian troops won the same number of VCs in the first 1.5 years of the war on the western front as were given through 3.5

years on other fronts. Did soldiers become less brave or worthy of praise? Or did the celebration of Indian soldiers lose its political significance as they shifted farther from Britain's home front? Examining other fronts would have been a useful contrast to the more well-promoted aspects of Indian service in the First World War, by considering how these spaces affected the post-war world as service got even messier, more grueling, and provided more connections with international anti-colonial networks.

Minor scholarly protestations aside, Basu's work is a very engaging and thoroughly researched addition to the expanding field of Indian participation in the First World War. It is a valuable asset for scholars, who can benefit from the interviews and less well-known stories that Basu engages. It also serves as a fascinating introduction to the topic for general readers. Basu is able to combine attention to detail with a flair for storytelling, giving these soldiers a well-deserved tribute. Her sympathetic novelistic approach is ideal for modern audiences, who are not untouched by the hardships of war, empire, and feelings of being adrift and isolated in an interconnected and fragmented world.

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