

Centenary Commemoration of the Great War (1914-18)

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The First World War (1914-1918) or the Great War for Civilisation, as it was known at the time, was a watershed event in modern world history. The events of that conflict changed the social and political map of the world forever. Its repercussions reverberate through time and many contemporary conflicts, particularly in the Middle East, trace their roots directly to the fall out of that war.

India, though a colony at the time, actively supported the war effort in its bid to gain Dominion status. The overwhelming majority was united in the opinion that if India desired greater responsibility and political autonomy, it must be willing to share in the burden of Imperial defence.

As a result, India contributed immensely to the war effort in terms of both men and material. Her soldiers served with credit and honour in numerous battlefields around the globe: in France and Belgium, in Aden, Arabia, East Africa, Gallipoli (Turkey), Egypt, Mesopotamia, Palestine, Persia, Salonica, Russia, and even in China. By the end of the war 1,100,000 (1.10 million) Indians had served overseas at the cost of 60,000 dead. They earned over 9,200 decorations for gallantry including 11 Victoria Crosses. These figures include the contribution of over 26,000 Imperial Service troops who were a part of the Indian State Forces.

To mark the occasion and highlight the pivotal role of India in the conflict, the USI Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research (CAFHR) in cooperation with the MEA Policy, Planning and Research Division, has drawn up a plan to use the Centenary commemoration of the Great War as a medium to project India's soft power globally, by emphasising on the sterling contribution made by the Indian Army towards the establishment of world peace. Functioning under the guidance of a Joint Steering Committee, a programme of planned activities has been agreed upon. These activities are listed in broad outline below for general information:-

- Produce a series of illustrated booklets on the role of the Indian Army in each major theatre; and one giving an overview of India and WW1.
- Produce detailed academic studies on each of the major theatres, and on derivatives thereof.
- Selected scholars/experts will be encouraged to take part in international conferences that will be organised in various countries, to highlight India's pivotal role in the conflict.
- An international conference on the theme "India and the Great War" to be organised by the USI in 2014/2015.
- A panel of writers/scholars on the same theme to be organised to participate in the Jaipur Literature Festival 2014.
- Prepare one or more coffee table books giving an illustrated overview of India and the Great War. (Volumes to depend on availability of suitable photographic images).
- Sponsor battlefield tours of the Indian battlefields in Gallipoli and in France & Flanders, in collaboration with local partners. Produce a "Battlefield Guide" on each, preferably as a collaborative effort with Australia and Belgium/France. Official involvement with sponsorship/publicity to continue through from 2014 till 2018. Thereafter local partners will be encouraged to carry forward with the themed tours on their own steam.
- Sponsor exhibitions on the theme of "India and the Great War". Exhibitions can be generic and/or theatre specific. Exhibitions to be prepared by the USI CAFHR in collaboration with local museums/partners overseas.
- Produce a documentary film on the theme "India and the Great War - An Overview".
- Specific activities that could be undertaken in collaboration with various Governments/Institutions to be identified for further action.
- To coordinate participation by Indian military contingents in ceremonies being organised overseas.

Members who have photographs, documents or other memorabilia of family members who served in the First World War and who wish to share these for inclusion in the project may kindly contact the Secretary CAFHR at cafhr@usiofindia.org

Editor's Note

In the above context, a short piece by Lieutenant General Baljit Singh, AVSM, VSM (Retd) recapitulating his experience during his visit to the United Kingdom in 1959 is being carried in the following pages under the title 'India And The Great War'.

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