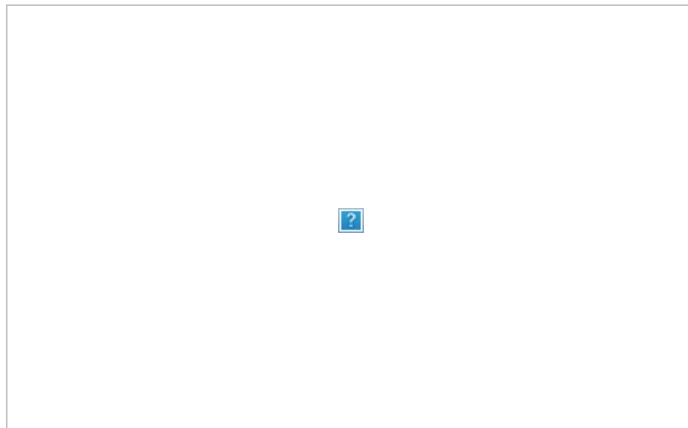


India and the Great War : India Office Records and Private Papers relating to the First World War, 1914-1918

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Over one million Indians served in the Indian Armed Forces as part of Britain's war effort during the First World War, with the Indian Army seeing action in most of the major theatres of the conflict. The main focus of India's military contribution was on the Western Front in France and Belgium, as well as in Mesopotamia, but smaller forces also served in East Africa, Gallipoli, Egypt and Palestine. The Indian contribution to the First World War is documented in the India Office Records, the vast archive of the British administration of India, which is kept at the British Library in London. Files relating to the conflict are spread over several of the principal series of official records.



As might be expected, the Military Department records contain files relating to many aspects of India's military effort in the War, including the hospitals for injured Indian soldiers in Brighton and the South Coast of England, Muslim cemeteries in England, the treatment of Indian Prisoners of War (PsW) in Germany and Turkey, and the conflict in Mesopotamia. There are also over 1,800 volumes of War Diaries containing information on the management of India's military effort at a very detailed level.

One of the most interesting series of records is the reports of the Censor of Indian Mails in France, with appended extracts from some of the letters written or received by Indian soldiers fighting in France. The extracts from the letters vividly illustrate the fear and trauma experienced by the soldiers, as well as their observations on the surroundings in which they found themselves, whether that be the trenches on the Western Front or a hospital in Brighton. Naubat Khan of the 107th Pioneers fighting in France wrote to his brother expressing the utter destruction he had witnessed 'The righteous God has sent down a calamity, it is the destruction of the Indians by a Flood'¹, while Gyan Singh stationed at the Indian Artillery Depot in England described the formidable German military machine 'The German is very strong. His ships sail the clouds and drop shells from the sky; his mines dig up the earth, and his hidden craft strike below the sea. Bombs and blinding acid are thrown from his trenches which are only 100 or 50 yards from ours. He has countless machine guns which kill the whole firing line when in attack. When he attacks we kill his men. The dead lie in heaps.'² Bachetar Singh, recovering from his wounds in the Indian Hospital in Brighton, struggled to describe the war to a friend in India 'How can I describe this war? It is like a furnace in which everything becomes ashes on both sides. When will Ishwar (God) have mercy so that this furnace will be stopped.', but reported favourably on the treatment Indians received in France and England from local people 'Those of the wounded who cannot walk are taken out in the evening in a motor car and are taken out every day. All the people of England and France treat us with respect and are very polite when they meet us.'³

There are some fascinating files on the treatment of Indian PsW who had been captured by German or Turkish forces. In one file, three wounded Indian soldiers gave statements recounting their experiences of being wounded and captured in France and in Germany. One of the soldiers, Ram Nath Singh of the 9th Bhopal Infantry, described how he came to meet the Kaiser who was visiting the hospital in Germany where he was being treated!⁴ In the same file is a letter from Jemadar Pirzag Singh of the 2nd Lancers, who had been taken prisoner in December 1917, and was being held at the PsW camp at Freiburg in Germany. Writing to the Indian Soldiers Fund, he requested that he be sent a new uniform, listing the articles of clothing he needed, with his measurements. He even drew a sketch of the tunic, carefully pointing out that the length of tunic for the Indian cavalry was greater than for the Infantry, coming to about two inches above the knee.⁵ The Secretary of the Fund forwarded his letter to the India Office with a request that he be sent a suitable supply of uniform.

The Military Department records contain many files relating to the campaign in Mesopotamia, including a report on the ill-fated defence of Kut-al-Amarah under Major General Charles Townshend, from the 3rd December 1915 to 29th April 1916, when the British Indian forces surrendered to the Turks.⁶ The India Office Military Department received the report of Lord Justice Younger's committee which investigated the harsh treatment Indian PsW subsequently received at the hands of their Turkish captors.⁷ There is also a file containing despatches on later operations in Mesopotamia, with recommendations for awards for bravery, and a book of maps of the military operations between the 12th December 1916 and 31st March 1917.⁸

Responsibility for overseeing India's foreign policy and frontier affairs, and for British relations with the Indian Princely States, rested with the Political & Secret Department of the India Office. As a result, the records of that department contain files on the wider aspects of the War, such as the Arab revolt, the future of Constantinople, German propaganda efforts in the Middle East, the progress of the War in Egypt, Palestine and Syria, Anglo-French relations in

the Near East, and the 1919 Peace Conference.

A series of memoranda prepared variously by the India Office, the Foreign Office of the UK Government, and by the Government of India, contain many interesting memoranda relating to the wider political aspects of the First World War and its aftermath. For instance, there is an India Office note from the 3rd November 1918 on the disposal of conquered territories in Mesopotamia and East Africa⁹, and a synopsis by the Foreign Office from the 6th February 1918 on the UK obligations to its allies and others.¹⁰

The significance of the events in Mesopotamia to India was spelled out in the first paragraph of the India Office note on the disposal of conquered territories: 'The conquered territory in which India has the largest and most direct interest is Mesopotamia. As is well known, India has been mainly instrumental in the conquest of this region. The majority of the troops employed were Indian; the expedition has throughout been based upon India; and the civil administration of the occupied districts has from the first been carried on under the guidance and inspiration of the Indian Government'.¹¹ Not surprisingly then, there is a substantial number of files in the Political Department's subject and annual files relating to Mesopotamia for the period during and immediately after the War. Approximately 635 files cover a wide range of subjects dealing with the war in Mesopotamia and the subsequent administration of the country up to the early 1920s.

The many financial aspects of the war effort are documented in a collection of 191 files in the India Office Financial Department. There are files on war expenditure, accounting arrangements, pay and pensions, the provision of funds to the Indian Expeditionary Forces, the cost of stores and equipment, and reparations. One file states, in response to a question in the House of Commons regarding the war expenditure incurred by the Indian Empire, that the war expenditure of the Government of India up to the 31st March 1919 could be taken at about £127,800,000 (around £2,710,638,000 in today's money), with Indian Princes and others contributing cash sums amounting to £2,100,000 (or around £44,541,000 today) in addition to placing further sums at the disposal of the Government of India for the purchase of horses, cars and vans, ambulances, comforts for the troops, etc.¹²

Trade and the flow of commodities were dealt with by the India Office Economic Department. The files for the years 1914 to 1918 deal mainly with trading with the enemy and hostile firms in India, the prohibition or limitation of the export of commodities from India (such as jute, manganese, cotton, rice, hides, oilseeds, etc.) and the restriction of enemies' supplies, enemy ships in neutral ports and their crews, contraband of war, sequestration of enemy property in India, enemy aliens, and imports from neutral countries. One file on pilgrim traffic during the War contains telegrams and correspondence on the subject of the threat to supplies being sent from India to Jeddah being seized by Turkish forces, and the safety of pilgrims travelling from India. Telegrams between the Secretary of State for India and the Viceroy discuss the possibility of prohibiting pilgrim traffic from India during 1915.¹³ These files still await detailed cataloguing, but are accessible to researchers via contemporary registers and indexes.

The records of the British Residency at Aden contain two collections relating to the First World War.¹⁴ Among the 149 files, there are files on psw, captured and enemy ships, Red Sea trade and trading with the enemy, enemy property, censorship, and arrangements for peace celebrations.

Complementing the government records are a number of significant private paper collections which contain papers relating to many aspects of the First World War. These include the papers of the Indian Soldiers Fund, which was established to provide comforts and clothing for Indian troops and prisoners of war in France and Mesopotamia during the War,¹⁵ and the papers of Sir Walter Lawrence, an eminent member of the Indian Civil Service who served as Commissioner for sick and wounded Indian soldiers in France and England from 1914 to 1916.¹⁶

There is also an attractive collection of illustrated war propaganda newspapers, *Satya Vani*, *Jangi Akhbar* and other titles, produced by the Eastern Department of the Ministry of Information and printed by the Illustrated London News in various Indian and Asian languages for distribution throughout India, the Middle East, North Africa, the Far East, and to Indians overseas and Indian troops.¹⁷

Both British and Indian politicians and leaders are represented in the Private Papers in relation to the First World War. Lord Curzon, former Viceroy of India, was a member of Lloyd George's War Cabinet, and his papers contain his correspondence relating to the War, diaries of visits he made to the Western Front, speeches he gave, as well as papers relating to the War Cabinet, Air Board and Shipping Control Committee, Ireland, Foreign affairs, as Leader of the House of Lords, and a series of maps.¹⁸ From the Indian perspective, there is a file of papers relating to Indian involvement in the First World War. This includes a letter, dated 14th August 1914, signed by Gandhi and other Indians residing in London offering their services, papers relating to the Indian Expeditionary Force and the Indian Field Ambulance Training Corps, and a copy of *Akbar-i-Jung*, an Urdu newspaper for Indian soldiers serving in Europe.¹⁹

The German perspective is also represented in a collection of letters from Count Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, German Chancellor from 1909 to 1917, to various Indian Princes, encouraging opposition to British rule in India and advocating the German view of the First World War, with supplementary papers relating to the German Mission in Kabul.²⁰

A selection of 75 files from the India Office Records has been digitised for the Europeana 1914-1918 project, along with the illustrated war propaganda newspapers and the Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg papers from the India Office Private Papers. The project is a free online resource which brings together original wartime documents, films and stories from 20 countries across Europe: <http://www.europeana1914-1918.eu/en> .

Note

The India Office Records are the documentary archives of the London end of the administration of British India, comprising the records of the East India Company (1600-1858), Board of Control (1784-1858), India Office (1858-1947), Burma Office (1937-1948), and a number of related British agencies overseas which were officially linked with one or

other of the four main bodies. The focus of the India Office Records is in the territories now included in India, Pakistan, Burma and Bangladesh and their administration before 1947, amounting to around 9 miles of shelves of material consisting of volumes, files and boxes of papers, including approximately 70,000 volumes of official publications.

The India Office Private Papers comprise about 300 major collections and over 3000 smaller deposits of papers relating primarily to the British experience in India. Though often including papers similar to or complementing the much more extensive official archives of the India Office Records, the Private Papers are distinguished from the Records by their provenance from private sources.

Endnotes

- 1.. India Office Records, The British Library, IOR/L/MIL/5/825/3 f.265
2. Ibid, IOR/L/MIL/5/825/3 f.274
3. Ibid, IOR/L/MIL/5/825/2 f.183
4. Ibid, IOR/L/MIL/7/17276 ff.97-108
- 5 Ibid, IOR/L/MIL/7/17276 ff.37-38
6. Ibid, IOR/L/MIL/17/15/105
7. Ibid, IOR/L/MIL/7/18737
8. Ibid, IOR/L/MIL/7/17407
9. Ibid, IOR/L/PS/18/B294
10. Ibid, IOR/L/PS/18/D228
11. Ibid, IOR/L/PS/18/B294
12. Ibid, IOR/L/F/7/2823. The modern currency values were taken from The National Archives online historic currency converter, <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency/>, accessed 8th January 2014
- 13 Ibid, IOR/L/E/7/792
14. Ibid, IOR/R/20/A/3961-4108
15. India Office Private Papers, The British Library, Mss Eur F120
16. Ibid, Mss Eur F143
17. Ibid, Mss Eur G117
18. Ibid, Mss Eur F111-112 Series 90-99
19. Ibid, Mss Eur F170/8
20. Ibid, Mss Eur E204 and E209

Indian Troops in World War I – Arrival at Marseilles*

In the end of September 1914, first units of the Indian Army arrived at Marseilles, France. Brigadier Sir John Smyth, Baronet, VC, MC, who was then a captain with the 15th Ludhiana Sikhs, now 2nd Battalion The Sikh Regiment (and later Secretary and Editor of USI from 01 Apr 1926-31 Mar 1929) described their arrival as under :-

“The 15th Sikhs were among the first Indian troops to arrive in France and the excitement and enthusiasm were tremendous. The men, none of whom had ever been out of India before, were rather dazed as we marched through the street to our camp. The ranks were soon broken by the cheering crowds and one could just see the heads of the men bobbing about amid an excited sea of French faces. The railing round our camp was black with people all day long. The Sikh is a cleanly person and gets under a pump at every opportunity no matter how cold the weather or the water. After the dusty march they took down their hair and beards and set about having a good wash. This absolutely brought the house down and there were delighted shrieks of “Voila les femmes Indiennes.” All these attentions became rather embarrassing after a time and we were glad when we moved to Orleans where we were supposed to undergo a period of training and acclimatisation.”

In their hasty departure from India our troops had departed with what they possessed. Sir John Smyth goes on to record :

“It was now October and starting to get chilly. But we were still only clad in our thin Indian drill uniforms. There was a great shortage of uniforms at home and we had to go all through that bitter winter in our drill.”

*The above is excerpted from an article “To Honour a Past” by Lieutenant General MS Shergill, PVSM, AVSM, VrC (Retd), published in USI Journal Vol. CXXXV, No 560, Apr-Jun 2005.

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