

Barkawi, Tarak. *Soldiers of Empire: Indian and British Armies in World War II*. Cambridge, United Kingdom; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

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How are soldiers made and armies assembled? Why do soldiers fight and what determines how effectively they do so? What does battle do to those who make it and what does it do to the sources from which histories are constructed? These questions lie at the heart of Tarak Barkawi's ambitious and articulate history of the polyglot colonial soldiers who fought for the British empire against the Japanese in WWII.

The book is organised in three parts. Part I examines the Indian Army's ethnic organisation to rethink the relationship between (imperial) army and (colonised) society. While dividing colonial recruits by ethnicity mitigated against anti-colonial combination, ethnically exclusive corps struggled to replace casualties, especially amongst junior officers. How then did the Indian Army – with its homogenous units of Gurkhas, Sikhs and Pathans – adapt to wartime expansion? Rejecting the opposition inherent in the army/society binary, Barkawi argues that the 'plasticity' of ethnic organisation provided resources which officers and men could adapt and appropriate to suit their purpose. British officers grew beards and fasted with 'their' men, seeking culturally-significant ways to articulate their proximity to – and authority over – colonial troops. In similar ways, soldiers framed calls on their employers in language which sought to mobilise, rather than to challenge, colonial presumptions. Neither contemporary writings about Indian ethnicity nor the army shaped in their image reflect essential characteristics of Indian society. Nor do they represent simply the machinations of imperial strategists. Rather, Barkawi suggests, army and society were co-constituted via the circuits of knowledge and power through which colonial soldiers were recruited and organised.

Part II examines discipline, exploring the circumstances in which it failed and the processes through which it was reconstructed. Barkawi details the shortcomings of the Indian Army in the First Arakan campaign in which both British and Indian troops were badly mauled in early encounters with the Imperial Japanese Army. The failures of these pre-war regulars – poor fire discipline, desertion, self-harm and reluctance to engage – did not reflect the inefficiency of colonial troops but the Indian Army's deficient preparations for jungle warfare. How then can we explain the remarkable turnaround in the army's performance from 1943? Barkawi's answer is as suggestive as it is simple: channelling Foucault and Durkheim to read drill as ritual – as something human and ancient not something western and modern – Barkawi contends that drill activates common human capacities for solidarity and organisation and is capable of sustaining men with little in common, even in the most brutal engagements. Recruits did not bring group identities to training; training gave them group identity. *Esprit de corps* – assembled through vertical and horizontal association, through shared rituals involving the imposition as well as the tolerated transgression of discipline – provided soldiers with the resources necessary to fight, and to fight on. In these circumstances, Barkawi argues, it becomes easier to understand why casualties – often presumed to undermine combat motivation – can also bolster the resolve of soldiers to fight. This anthropology of combat discipline challenges military sociology's emphasis on group and national identities – neither of which account for the performance of colonial soldiers in WWII – arguing that the common, ritual experiences of training, discipline and contact better explain the behaviour of soldiers in combat.

In Barkawi's account, supposedly distinctive ways of fighting are revealed to be situational, products of the contours of battle more than expressions of a particular national character or ideology. Instead of seeing combat as a space in which political agency is expressed – as per Omer Bartov – Barkawi emphasises the limits battle imposes on soldiers. Chapter 6 shows, brilliantly, how combat's forms and patterns limit the choices available to participants. Box defence of a perimeter offered few choices: stand and fight and hope to survive or retreat, giving up the perimeter and the meagre, collective protection provided by committed, shared defence. Similarly, when surrender was, or was thought to be, impossible neither a death wish, nor fanatical loyalty, was required for soldiers to fight to the death. Thus, the brutality of the conflict – both anticipated and experienced – encouraged soldiers and officers to give no quarter, and to expect none to be given. Here, then, in the constraining and reciprocal effects of battle, Barkawi seeks to explain the nature of the war in the Pacific. Atrocities, which occurred on both sides, were mutually productive. Whereas eye witnesses, and some historians, explained Japanese soldiers' behaviour on the battlefield as evidence of their savagery or fanaticism, Barkawi teases out the common, human calculations which shaped soldiers' behaviour, showing that Indian and imperial troops could fight in 'Japanese ways', as at the battle of Sangshak, in March 1944, when members of 152nd Indian Parachute division mounted their own 'banzai charge' in a hopeless, and ostensibly futile, counter-attack. The Japanese were so impressed that survivors were taken prisoner (and many subsequently freed).

If battle could, in some circumstances, scramble racial categories, Part III shows how histories of the war served to reconstruct them. 'Suffused' in racism, Allied accounts of the fighting in Burma sought recourse in narratives of Japanese otherness to impose structure on the conflict (and on soldiers' experiences of it). Returning to Sangshak via the battle's contested historiography, Barkawi shows how racism shaped memories and histories of the war, obscuring the common humanity – and mutual intelligibility – of soldiers on both sides. Rejecting the normalisation of national armies implicit in much of the extant literature, Barkawi invites historians and sociologists of war to produce works as cosmopolitan as the armies and conflicts they study. Despite the historical and sociological framing of conflict as a national enterprise, soldiering has been – and remains – a cosmopolitan, transactional business.

From this perspective, some readers may wonder if *Soldiers of Empire* has enough to say about the calculations and agency of the rank and file, even allowing for the obvious archival problems which limit our access to these men. After all, training manuals tell us little about how drill was actually conducted and less about how it was experienced. Though the archival base for the book is dense, South Asianists may find it lopsided. Some military historians and sociologists may feel their disciplines are caricatured for the purpose of critique. Questions about masculinity and gender are surprisingly underexplored, despite the sustained and creative engagement with theory (an inflection which some readers will doubtless resent).

If these kinds of responses illustrate the perils of working at the interface of disciplines and approaches, this book shows just how productive such an approach can be. In helping us to see war's cosmopolitan faces – and to provincialize our understandings of combat and its

histories – *Soldiers of Empire* provides a compelling and suggestive account of why, and how, histories of war should be written. Creatively theorised, and deeply engaged with its rich, historical material, this book deserves to be widely and carefully read.