Colonial Divisions

OMAR WARAICH

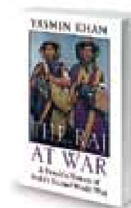
INDIA'S FORGOTTEN ROLE IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

On 3 September 1939, Subhas Chandra Bose was addressing a rally of 200,000 people by the oceanfront in the city now known as Chennai. The ambitious Congress leader had acquired an impressive national following. He could draw similar-sized crowds throughout the country, luring them with his charismatic style and his uncompromising demands for Indian freedom. During the speech, a member of the audience thrust an evening paper into his hand. Bose paused to glimpse the headline on the front page. War had broken out in Europe. It was the event that he, an inveterate opponent of the British, had eagerly anticipated. The moment, he would go on to write in his memoir, offered Indians "a unique opportunity for winning freedom."

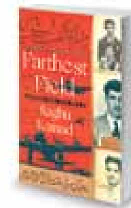
In India, Bose was a distinguished leftist with pronounced views on equality. He regarded Mohandas Gandhi's wing of the party as too weak and too right-wing for his taste. Earlier that year, he had formed his own faction within the party, the Forward Bloc, to break Gandhi's grip on the Congress and steer it in a more progressive direction. When it came to the wider world, however, Bose was an ultranationalist. For years, he had been busy ingratiating himself with Europe's foremost fascists. He met Benito Mussolini multiple times in Italy, a fact he advertised with pride, provoking cringes from Jawaharlal Nehru who suspected Bose fancied himself a local variant of the Duce.

Nehru had travelled to Spain during the country's civil war to express solidarity with the republican cause. In London, he spoke at anti-fascist rallies alongside leading British socialists. Bose, who by this time had developed a weakness for military uniforms, was unbothered by the character of the Italian and German regimes. Getting the British out was all that mattered to him. A fascist victory in Europe, he hoped, would break up the British Empire to finally deliver the dream of Indian independence.

Over the next ten months, Bose addressed hundreds of rallies like the one in Madras. He openly agitated for a British defeat. Much to Bose's dismay, other Indian leaders didn't share his enthusiasm. After some wavering, Gandhi came out on the side of the British. He had earlier urged the British people to resist Hitler only through "spiritual force," while counselling the German leader, in an undelivered letter addressed to "my friend," to discover the virtues of peace.



The Raj at War: A People's History of India's Second World War
Yasmin Khan
Vintage India, 448 pages, ₹699



Farthest Field: An Indian Story of the Second World War
Raghu Karnad
HarperCollins India, 320 pages, ₹550

TOPICAL PRESS AGENCY / GETTY IMAGES

More than 2.5 million troops were enlisted from the subcontinent. Nearly 90,000 perished, many of them in North Africa.

Nehru was resolute in his hostility to fascism. But he wanted to ensure that any Indian support for the Allied forces would be contingent on a promise of Indian freedom. Lord Linlithgow, the British viceroy of the time, had already declared India a participant in Britain's war with Germany without consulting a single Indian. He saw no need to do otherwise. After all, Indian troops had long served the British Empire. They had loyally tamed rebellions both at home and in other colonies abroad. Over a million Indians had fought in the First World War under the British flag. None of this had even slightly weakened the Raj. Since 1857, Indian soldiers had been the upholders of its order.

Nehru had scant faith that Linlithgow would yield a promise of full independence. The Congress leader had memorably described the viceroy as "heavy of body and slow of mind." Linlithgow, who was too carapaced to let the slight wound him, tried to turn it to his advantage. He mockingly pleaded with Nehru to slacken the pace of his insistent demands, arguing that his "slow Anglo-Saxon mind cannot keep pace with your quick intellect."

As far as the addlepated viceroy was concerned, Indian independence was satisfyingly remote, even though a new generation of Foreign Office understrappers had begun to appreciate its inevitability. Linlithgow made some placatory noises about India being granted "dominion status." To

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Subhas Chandra Bose met Hitler in 1942. He hoped to secure support for Indian independence, but the German dictator echoed Churchill's belief that Indians were incapable of governing themselves. Japan was the only Axis power to back Bose's nationalism.

complicate the issue, he suggested this might not be possible until Muslim grievances were addressed. This infuriated Nehru, but must have elicited a rare smile from his habitually stone-faced rival Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League.

Before he was tossed into jail for a twelfth time in 1940, Bose called on Jinnah to enlist his support. But the suave barrister had already directed his loyalties. Jinnah was happy to support the British while he repurposed the Muslim League into a political vehicle fit to transport his ambitions. Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, the leader of the Hindu Mahasabha, also scented opportunity for his branch of the faithful. The war, he told Bose, would allow his right-wing Hindu supporters to secure arms training from the British.

Jinnah fastidiously avoided arrest. He loathed the idea of cold metal creasing his well-tailored cuffs, and preferred nights within the gates of his vast Malabar Hill home in Bombay to those behind narrowly spaced bars. Both Nehru and Gandhi, seen as more hostile by the British, endured long prison spells. Bose famously bolted his captivity in Calcutta and, after a stint in Kabul, established a Nazi-sponsored "government-in-exile" in Europe.

// To behold the full picture of the war one has to acquire a much wider lens than is traditionally offered. //

Jinnah had recently quit self-imposed exile in London, where he had run a lucrative law practice, let his Gladstonian liberalism lapse into an admiration of Mustafa Kemal of Turkey, and failed in his ambition to become a member of the British parliament. Back in India, electoral success remained elusive. In the 1937 regional elections, his Muslim League suffered a humiliating set of defeats to the Congress.

The war changed everything. Mere months after its outbreak, Jinnah mounted a stage at Lahore's Minto Park, the same spot where, in 1929, the Congress had passed a resolution calling for *Purna Swaraj*—the full independence of India. He lit one of the 50 or so Craven A cigarettes he incinerated each day. In between drags, Jinnah laid out the arithmetic behind his demand for a Muslim homeland. "Brother Gandhi

has three votes," he quipped, "and I have just one." The only way to counter Hindu preponderance, he said, was to carve out a nation of one's own.

MARGARET BOURKE-WHITE / THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION / GETTY IMAGES

During the Second World War, Muhammad Ali Jinnah revived the flagging fortunes of the Muslim League and led the demand for Pakistan.

FEW ARE BETTER PLACED TO SHOW how the Second World War led to Partition than the British historian Yasmin Khan. Both of her grandfathers played roles in shaping these events. One was a British officer stationed with an Indian tank regiment. The other was a Muslim League politician who later relocated to Pakistan, the new country he had campaigned for. An associate professor at Oxford, Khan has written two authoritative and well-timed books—neither of which would likely have met with the full approval of her grandfathers. Khan's first book, *The Great Partition*, was published in 2007, to coincide with the sixtieth anniversary of the subcontinent's division. Her latest volume, *The Raj at War: A People's History of India's Second World War*, arrives in bookshops against the backdrop of commemorations to mark the Axis surrender 70 years ago. It also marks a welcome diversion from a London-headquartered publisher's usual preoccupations with the war.

As far back as 1981, the literary critic John Martin Ellis predicted: "Soon, no doubt, some statistician of the absurd will tell us that the tonnage of books about the Second World War has finally exceeded the weight of ammunition expended in its course." By now the scales must have tipped, and for understandable reasons. Chroniclers of the war have the advantage of drawing on readers' reservoir of pre-existing knowledge. No student with the misfortune to pass through a British-influenced school's history curriculum emerges without a keen familiarity with the war's cast of cowards, heroes and villains.

Political leaders who evince feeble resolve in the face of a national threat are quickly likened to Neville Chamberlain. Winston Churchill—whose reputation has been sanitised just as it has been exalted—remains the ultimate example of how pluck can overcome adversity. And Adolf Hitler—the embodiment of evil—is a template for today's tyrants, who, by killing their own people or menacing neighbours, become the targets of new wars.

The Second World War also offers stark lessons. The Holocaust, a systematic attempt to wipe out an entire people, marks humanity's lowest point. The story of the defeat of fascism demonstrates how entire nations made unexampled sacrifices to be able to create the peaceful, democratic, and—amongst its own—borderless union that is Europe today. There, countries can still be ruined at each other's hands economically, as the recent example of Greece shows, but no longer militarily.

To behold the full picture of the war, however, one has to acquire a much wider lens than is traditionally offered. Some of the most decisive battles, for example, were fought in Europe's east. It was at Stalingrad and Kursk, at the hands of the Soviet Union, that the Nazis suffered their worst defeats—a fact that was inconvenient for Cold War-era histories of the Second World War, and still sits ill with Vladimir Putin's rivals in the West, who stayed away from this year's commemoration of the end of the "Great Patriotic War" in Moscow.

"Russia's role was central and critical and this should never be forgotten by historians," an editorial in the *Financial Times* declared in May. "The Soviet Union lost more than 20m citizens and its role in defeating Nazi Germany was greater than that of any state. The number who died in the siege of Leningrad exceeded the total losses of British and US forces combined in the entire war."

But for the Second World War to assume the full significance of its name, attention has to be cast on other continents, too. In recent years, a clutch of writers has stepped forward to try and rescue this much-obscured history. The story of China during the war, where some 20 million people perished against the backdrop of nationalists and communists forging fleeting unity to fight the Japanese, has been

told in books with titles such as *Forgotten Wars* and *Forgotten Armies*. Last year, the British writer Barnaby Philips published a book about African soldiers sent to fight in Burma as part of what he called "Britain's forgotten African army."

The war history of the Indian army enjoys some occasional recognition. There are mentions of the Gurkhas, for example. What isn't often realised is that the subcontinent was the source of the largest volunteer army ever assembled. More than 2.5 million troops were enlisted from present-day India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal. Nearly 90,000 of them never returned. Their graves lie scattered across vast stretches of southern Europe, north Africa and east Asia, near the battlefields where they triumphed at Imphal, Kohima, Tobruk, Monte Cassino and, with especial heroism, Keren.

They included officers, soldiers, and a bewildering array of tradesmen, including cobblers, cooks, tailors, cleaners and "coolies." They were Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and Parsis. Some of them had already served in the First World War. Some of them went on to fight, thanks to Bose, on both sides of the war and even against each other. They formed half of the troop commitment from Britain's possessions abroad. "Britain did not fight the Second World War," as Khan writes, "the British Empire did."

Khan is joined in her task of offering a much-needed corrective by another author, whose first book is also published this summer. Raghu Karnad is not a historian but a talented Indian journalist. Unlike Khan, who takes in the full sweep of events, Karnad devotes most of his attention to the story of three men, three brothers-in-law from his family, who fought in the war. In *Farthest Field: An Indian Story of the Second World War*, he skilfully weaves a narrative out of a few frayed threads he found lingering in his grandmother's home.

Strikingly for an academic historian of South Asia, Khan writes well. This, sadly, is a distinction rarer than it ought to be. Using a spare and brisk style, she renders her rigorous scholarship eminently readable to a general audience. Karnad approaches his material from the other direction. He is a writer whose prose can rival poetry, and, with a fair bit of licence, deploys his reportorial flair in the service of historical inquiry. Both books are less about the fighting than the people swept up by it.

FOR MANY INDIAN SOLDIERS, serving the British was family tradition. Gurbuksh Singh Dhillon, a Punjabi like half of the soldiers in the Indian army, came from a succession of army men. He delighted in the fact that he was an officer, a distinction that had long been denied to Indians in the army. It was only after 1932, when a military academy was established at Dehradun, that local second lieutenants began to emerge. Ironically, the idea for the academy was Jinnah's. Since Partition, its graduates, now serving India, have fought three wars with neighbouring Pakistan, which he founded.

Enlisting at Dehradun became a guaranteed path to securing an education, status and mobility. Indian officers were proud of the modernity they embraced there, and learned to ignore the fact that they were paid less than their English equivalents. They were, in some ways, beneficiaries of racial prejudice themselves, as they were drawn from a select group of supposedly army-suitable castes.

// An edict from London resisted Indian officers sitting on courts martial because they "should not have power of punishment over white men." //

Loyalty to the British also appealed to the Parsis of Calicut, as Karnad informs us. "What the Gurkhas were in the Arms, Parsis were in civilian life. The exemplary race making the best of British command without any desire to usurp it." On this point, as elsewhere, Karnad's relentless lyricism impels him towards some extravagant essentialism. The Parsis, he writes, "were devoutly civilised, consummately lawful … there was always politesse."

It's a tendency that mars an otherwise promising chapter on Waziristan, where, along the Afghan border, a war between local tribesmen and soldiers who owe their existence to British martial traditions continues to this day. The Parsis were said to be of "pure blood" that had been "passed carefully" from cup to cup, over centuries, without being "polluted." By contrast, the Pashtuns were "implacable" and "stone-sprung terrors," susceptible to the sway of their "Mad Mullahs." It isn't always clear whether Karnad is just ventriloquising the prejudices of the time, or lazily repeating them.

As Khan writes, most Indian soldiers weren't roused by their fealty to the King Emperor. Nor is it entirely accurate to describe them as volunteers. In many cases, they were conscripted by poor health and poverty. "British rule," Khan writes understatedly, had "not delivered on its promises." About 90 percent of the subcontinent's population was still mired in poverty at the outbreak of the war, only an eighth of it was literate, and the average life expectancy was just 26 years. The war offered three daily meals to young men who could expect to die soon, and a modest source of income for the families they left behind.

Their departures were rarely free of emotion. Mothers who had already bid tearful farewells to a son or two stood athwart doorways, declining exit to their youngest progeny. Young women lustily crooned songs of longing for the men who had been forced to leave them. Others used the opportunity to flee their families, their marriages and other responsibilities. In some cases, possessive fathers used the war to test their daughter's suitors.

One of the many moving stories in Khan's book involves Premindra Singh Bhagat, a young man who had fallen in love with Mohini, the daughter of an Indian colonel who thought little of him. Sent away to modern-day Ethiopia, Bhagat became a sapper, a member of a bomb disposal unit, just like Karnad's great-uncle Bobby. He was tasked with clearing mines scattered by retreating Italian forces. The hazards of the job nearly cost him his life on three separate occasions. For surviving, he became the first Indian to

win the Victoria Cross during the war, one of the 34 Indians who were given the medal of bravery. Bhagat didn't feel he deserved it. "After all," he wrote to Mohini in one of his tender letters from the frontline, "there were some people killed and I was the lucky one to escape." His luck was to continue. In 1942, the stern colonel withdrew his reservations, and the couple were married in Poona.

Racial tensions deepened during the war. Once, Dhillon recalled in an interview with writer Amitav Ghosh, when he asked if he could swim with English officers, he was rebuffed. Hearing the exchange, another officer shouted at Dhillon in their native Punjabi. "Don't think you're special just because you've become an officer," he said. "We may be 'sahibs' to our soldiers, but we're still 'bloody niggers' to the British." The discrimination was inscribed in official policy, from the mess halls all the way to the Whitehall ministries. Quarrels broke out at meal times when Indian soldiers said they had grown weary of the constantly served boiled cabbage. An edict from London resisted Indian officers sitting on courts martial, because they "should not have power of punishment over white men."

Such attitudes are said to have led to the Bengal famine of 1943, when three, perhaps four, million people starved to death because the British salted away provisions. India was a crucial supply ground for the fight against the Japanese, and local shortages were not unusual, but Churchill decided to choke off supplies to Bengal. When he was told that Gandhi was threatening to fast until death in reaction, Churchill welcomed the prospect. Later, he demanded an explanation for why the man he once called a "malignant subversive fanatic" was still alive.

At the same time, Indian soldiers stationed in Malaya found they had become subjects of a different kind of hostility. The native population saw them as enforcers of their oppression. These views were new to men such as Dhillon, and they awakened anti-colonial attitudes within them. After a British surrender at Singapore, Dhillon and thousands of others were handed over to the Japanese. From there, they went on to join the Indian National Army, an anti-British force committed to Indian freedom led by Sikh soldiers loyal to Subhas Chandra Bose.

These men became known in India as "Jifs," a derisive term for Indian soldiers under Japanese command. Hitler had denied Bose support for Indian independence. The German dictator echoed Churchill's belief that Indians were incapable of governing themselves. But the Japanese did come through for Bose, vowing to support Indian freedom in exchange for a swelling of their ranks. Near the end

National Child Rights Research Fellowship 2015 - 16

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3. A sample of your published or unpublished paper/article or any documentation done on a related theme.
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189/A, Anand Estate, Sane Guruji Marg, Mumbai 400011.

The names of researchers awarded the Fellowship will be announced on **www.cry.org** in October 2015.

REG SPELLER / FOX PHOTOS / HULTON ARCHIVE / GETTY IMAGES

Numerous soldiers of the Indian army received the Victoria Cross for their valour. For many decades, the South Asians who played a crucial role in the defeat of fascism were rarely registered in Western histories, and often omitted even from Indian ones.

of the war, these men came face to face with a peculiar kind of enemy: their fellow countrymen and erstwhile comrades still fighting under the British flag. The Allies went on to triumph at simultaneous battles at Imphal and Kohima. Karnad is at the height of his powers in describing these events, having travelled to the sites of these battles and stealing a soon-to-be-lost chance to interview aged local veterans of the war. "The Jifs," he summarises, "had lost, and badly, but the future was on their side."

After the war, Dhillon was tried for treason at Delhi's Red Fort, along with two other officers of the Indian National Army—a Muslim named Shah Nawaz Khan, and a Hindu named Prem Kumar Sahgal. The three were convicted of waging war against the King Emperor, but then swiftly released. The British were forced to set them free after demonstrations against their rule, by then widely despised, mushroomed.

It was always a sham that Indian soldiers who didn't enjoy freedom at home were sent off to distant lands to supposedly secure it there. The war had ended and the British had outlasted their welcome. The idea of them publicly hanging three Indian officers, of three different religions, was seen as a step too far. The country's leading lawyers, including Nehru, leapt to the men's defence. A series of small mutinies broke out around India in solidarity.

As the three men were borne aloft by crowds and hailed as national heroes, it became clear to the British that they had to go. Bose never got to see his dream of a free India realised. He died in a mysterious plane crash soon after the Japanese surrender. But it is a testament to the capricious nature of history—and the calamitous nature of British rule—that it was Bose's men who were seen as the heroes of the war, despite having fought on the wrong side of it.

For several decades, the millions of South Asians who played a crucial role in the defeat of fascism were rarely registered in Western histories and often omitted from Indian ones. Hopefully, these two excellent books will help set that injustice right. ■