The Indian Army on the Western Front: India's Expeditionary Force to France and Belgium in the First World War

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Unsurprisingly, given the significant First World War anniversary that is now upon us, there has been a raft of new books on the conflict with a variety of foci; each aimed at different groups on the spectrum of amateur enthusiast to hardened academic scholar. *The Indian Army on the Western Front* is a welcome addition to the corps of literature on the First World War and offers a look at a lesser studied topic. Indian Expeditionary Force A (IEFA), made up of the Indian Corps and Indian Cavalry Corps, landed at Marseilles on 26 October 1914 and served on the Western Front until the end of 1915; some cavalry and artillery elements did remain in France and Flanders until 1918. Though many officers who served with the IEFA praised the Indian soldiers for their resilience and strong performance under the alien conditions of the Western Front, historians have tended to dismiss this view as fanciful. Author George Morton-Jack offers a different interpretation of the Indian Army on the Western Front.

Prior to the publication of George Morton-Jack's book those looking to study the Indian Army's contribution on the Western Front had few options. The first of these options was to read the official history of the Indian Corps on the Western Front written by F. E. Smith and John Merewether; both of whom served as the Indian Corps' Recording Officer during the conflict.⁽¹⁾ Alternatively, there is a range of published primary sources available to researchers in the form of memoirs.⁽²⁾ More recently the Indian Army's experience during the First World War has featured in several articles and book chapters. The stand out work on the Indian Army and the Great War is Gordon Corrigan's *Sepoys in the Trenches*; if there is a comparison to make, it is between these two tomes.⁽³⁾ Corrigan is himself a former Gurkha officer, hence the inspiration for writing *Sepoys in the Trenches*. At the time of the First World War Gurkha regiments served as part of the Indian Army and saw action in various theatres of the War. Corrigan's book looks only at the IEFA's infantry divisions which left Europe for Mesopotamia on Boxing Day 1915.

The first four chapters of this work are concerned not with the Western Front or even the First World War but the build up to the conflict. As with any military history book relating to the Army in India, *The Indian Army on the Western Front* contains a chapter which discusses the make-up of the forces in India. Morton-Jack offers descriptions of the Army in India's infantry, cavalry, artillery and engineers, and details the

command structure. This period of the Indian Army's history reads as a veritable who's who of Britain's First World War, as many men now synonymous with the conflict served in India prior to 1914, including Sir Douglas Haig, Sir Ian Hamilton, Earl Kitchener of Khartoum, and Sir Horace Smith-Dorrian. No such work would be complete without reference to both the Great Mutiny of 1857 and the 'Martial Race' theory; to the authors credit however, discussion of these two topics is kept to a minimum. From this opening *The Indian Army on the Western Front* goes on to look at the Indian Army from the Tirah Campaign of 1897–8 on the North-West Frontier of India – modern day Pakistan – up until 1914. The main topic of discussion in these early chapters is the conflict in the higher echelons of the Indian Army regarding the need to prepare for regular warfare, as was seen during the Boer War, and small wars, also known as irregular warfare such as was fought on the North West Frontier. Initially the threat of regular warfare was from a Tsarist Russian invasion of India through Afghanistan but in the early 20th century the threat shifted from Russia to Imperial Germany. Chapters entitled 'Strengths' and 'Weaknesses' assess the merits and flaws of this preparation. The role of Kitchener is explored in detail. As Commander-in-Chief for India Kitchener was a catalyst for re-organisation and modernisation within the Army of India. Sir Douglas Haig served as Inspector-General of Cavalry and Chief of Staff in India before the First World War and his role in planning for an Indian expeditionary force is evaluated by Morton-Jack also. The fact this book's focus is the Indian Army and its development as a fighting force gives the discussion of Kitchener and Haig a unique viewpoint; usually such discussion focuses on Kitchener and Haig's development as individuals. Most recent works on both Haig and Kitchener have featured their time in India as nothing more than a prelude to their Great War careers. Morton-Jack's focus on the Indian Army's preparations for war in these chapters is a kin to Spencer Jones' recent book *From Boer War to World War* which concerned itself with the British Army in the period 1902 to 1914. Jones' book appears to have been published too late to have been included in Morton-Jack's bibliography but he does make reference to the PhD thesis on which *From Boer War to World War* is based.⁽⁴⁾

After assessing the Army of India prior to the outbreak of the First World War, *The Indian Army on the Western Front* moves onto IEFA on to the Western Front. In two short chapters Morton-Jack explains the seamless process by which IEFA embarked in India and landed at Marseilles. Marseilles was not the IEFA's original destination. Initially the plan was for Indian battalions to replace British battalions garrisoning Egypt, Sudan, Malta, and Gibraltar. However it was decided to include Indian units on the Western Front as a means of showing British respect for Indians and potentially encourage further support for the government and for the war. Morton-Jack compares IEFA's successful transfer from the sub-continent to Europe with the experiences of other expeditionary forces which set forth from India. Though not planned for in peace time Expeditionary Force C was assembled and despatched to East Africa without delay. Similarly, in a pre-war plan Expeditionary Force D was shipped to Mesopotamia with relative ease. Indian Expeditionary Force B however, was poorly organised and a clumsy disembarkation led to defeat at the battle of Tanga, 3–5 November 1914. By diversifying away from the Western Front Morton-Jack highlights how effective pre-war planning and proficient army-navy co-operation could be; without this preparedness the Indian Army could not have assisted the British Empire on the Western Front in 1914.

When looking at the Indian Army's first engagement in Europe, the First Battle of Ypres, the author is very measured in his praise for their performance. Morton-Jack asserts that the combined involvement of the Indian Expeditionary Force A, British Territorials, and French reinforcements saved the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) from serious overstretch in November 1914. Contemporaries, including Sir John French and Sir Douglas Haig, have previously praised the Indian Corps for 'filling the gap' but *The Indian Army on the Western Front* shows the Indian reinforcements to be only part of the solution to the BEF's problems at that time. Morton-Jack follows this by looking at one of the most commonly cited problems the Indian Army faced in France and Flanders, winter. The Indian troops lacked winter clothes but in London a charity was set up to counter this difficulty. The Indian Soldiers' Fund in co-operation with the India Office and War Office were able to supply ample warm clothes for the Indian troops. Likewise, the Indian Army's dietary requirements were met and Morton-Jack looks at the system by which casualties were replaced by reinforcements from India.

Many works on the Indian Army contain chapters on disaffection and Morton-Jack's book is no different.⁽⁵⁾ The Indian Army's largest mutinous act of the First World War came at the Singapore Naval Base in 1915; the Western Front saw nothing on this scale but it did nonetheless feature problems of morale for the Indian soldiers which affected its ability to fight. During the early stages of Indian involvement in Europe there was a trend of self-mutilation. Of 1,848 Indian Troops wounded by 3 November 1914 some 57 per cent had wounds to their hands. Not all of these wounds would have been self-inflicted but a good many were and measures had to be taken to prevent further acts. Morton-Jack argues that such acts were also present in British units throughout the First World War and that the act was carried out by only two-and-a-half per cent of the men of IEFA. The second issue of note explored by Morton-Jack is the act of fleeing the trenches under fire. *The Indian Army on the Western Front* shows that Indian soldiers were human like any other and did on occasion fall back under heavy shell fire; British units did so too. Interesting analysis is also offered in this section as to how the loss of officers affected an Indian unit under fire .

Morton-Jack's approach to the fighting record of IEFA on the Western Front sets this book apart from its predecessors. Rather than the more usual chronological approach of taking each battle in turn and looking at the methods employed *The Indian Army on the Western Front* uses the Indian's tactics to drive the chapters. The chapters in question are entitled 'Old tactics' and 'New tactics'. The former is a survey of the tactics used in 1914 and 1915 that were already part of the Indian Army's repertoire prior to the First World War. The infantry of IEFA, the Indian Corps, was able to apply its training for both regular and frontier warfare to the fighting on the Western Front to good effect. For example in at First Ypres in 1914 the Indian Corps was not yet restricted by the complex trench systems that would later define the Western Front. Subsequently Indian units were able to fight in small group as they had trained to do on the North-West Frontier. Co-operation with artillery also utilised pre-war training. The chapter 'New tactics' fits perfectly with the current historiography of the BEF which focuses on the learning process, or curve, of British units over the course of the war. The BEF's learning process is largely concerned with the diluting of the professional army by with the addition of territorial and volunteer battalions and their subsequent adaptation to trench warfare.⁽⁶⁾ The education the Indian units received was in modern European warfare; although there were still traditional issues such as new officers having to learn the Indian languages of command. By September 1915 Indian units were advancing into no-man's land during the preliminary artillery bombardment, wearing gas mask, and carrying flags to aid the aerial observers. Indian soldiers carried new model Vickers machine guns, threw Mills bombs, and fired trench mortars. The Indian Corps had come a long way from the North-West Frontier. At the time, and reasserted by Morton-Jack, it was thought that had the Indian Corps served on the Western Front for the entirety of the Great War it would have become one of the elite fighting formations of the war. Instead however, the Indian infantry put these newly learned skills to good effect in other theatres of the First World War. *The Indian Army on the Western Front* gives an informative account of how former IEFA units contributed to victory in Mesopotamia. Indian cavalry and artillery remained on the Western Front until moved to Palestine in 1918. Morton-Jack takes a brief look at this continued Indian presence on the Western Front. The Indian cavalry proved useful both at the Battle of the Somme in 1916 and the Battle of Cambrai in 1917. When they did move to Palestine the Indian cavalrymen were able to put

the skills they had developed in Europe to full effect. Charging Turkish positions just as they had done Germans; then dismounting to set up a forward machine gun post.

The final two chapters of *The Indian Army on the Western Front* take a look at the command, staff, and administrative side of the First World War. Similar studies are beginning to be undertaken with regards to the BEF. The Indians Corps senior commanders divided the opinion of their contemporaries. For those who served with them in IEFA they were unjustly treated by the higher echelons of the BEF. For those same higher echelons of the BEF, the Indian Army was commanded by inept old men, who could not adjust to modern warfare. Morton-Jack's level assessment suggests that there was indeed such men, who had risen in the Indian Army through seniority and not on merit but there was others who, despite their age, adapted well to the conditions of the Western Front. Sir James Willocks, initial commander of IEFA, receives the weightiest analysis. Willocks' greatest skill was his personal rapport with his men, he had spent almost his entire life in India and spoke many native languages. Willocks had excelled in tribal warfare but was never able to convert this to success in trench warfare. Willocks' successor Charles Anderson and many other IEFA commanders and staff are also assessed; some successfully adapted to the conditions of the Western Front, others did not. The 'Administration' chapter is an interesting mix of common military themes such as logistics and medical arrangements.⁽⁷⁾ Morton-Jack again calls on the problems faced by Indian troops outside of Europe to highlight the organisation and efficiency of the Indian Army in France and Flanders. IEFA did have a distinct advantage of coming under Kitchener's jurisdiction in Europe unlike Expeditionary Forces B, C, and D which were still controlled from India.

As stated above this book's main competitor is *Sepoys in the Trenches* yet this book is so much more than a simple account of the Indian Army on the Western Front. George Morton-Jack has produced a volume that incorporates almost every strand of current research on the BEF. If the reader was to have a tick sheet at hand as they read this book they could mark off everything from preparation through to staff work and logistics. *The Indian Army on the Western Front* is a very welcome addition to First World War literature and could well prove to be a framework for future works that wish to analyse particular elements of the BEF. Morton-Jack's book is extremely stimulating and should appeal to academics and enthusiasts alike; it is a must read book for students of the First World War.

Notes

1. J. Merrewether & F. E. Smith, *The Indian Corps in France* (London, 1919).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. These include: D. Drake-Brockman, *With the Royal Garhwal Rifles in the Great War* (Haywards Heath, 1934); *Indian Cavalry Officer 1914–15*, ed. J. Wakefield & J Weippert (Tunbridge Wells, 1986); J. Willocks, *With the Indians in France* (London, 1920).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. G. Corrigan, *Sepoys in the Trenches* (Staplehurst, 1999).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. S. Jones, *From Boer War to World War, Tactical Reform of the British Army, 1902-1914* (Oklahoma City, OK, 2012).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. For example: D. Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj* (Basingstoke, 1994).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. For an outline of the learning curve argument see <
<https://www.rusi.org/analysis/commentary/ref:C4AF97CF94AC8B/#.VDv8-PldXuI> [2]>[accessed 16 October 2014].[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. For a study of BEF logistics see I. Brown, *British Logistics on the Western Front* (Westport, 1998) and for a study of British medicine in the First World War see M. Harrison, *The Medical War: British Military Medicine in the First World War* (Oxford, 2010).[Back to \(17\)](#)

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[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/113526>

[2] <https://www.rusi.org/analysis/commentary/ref:C4AF97CF94AC8B/#.VDv8-PldXuI>