Colonial Encounters in the Second World War:

The Indian experience

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Photograph © Imperial War Museums

It is a little-remembered fact that when Victory over Japan Day or VJ Day was first celebrated by the Allies in Europe on 15 August 70 years ago, Victory Week had also been celebrated in Delhi. Vast processions of soldiers, brass and pipe bands with regimental flags of the British Indian Army passed through the centre of the city, heralding the end of the Second World War. 2015, however, presents a very different picture. This military might and jubilation over the victory of the Allied forces is no longer displayed in India, Pakistan or Bangladesh. Modern South Asia, segmented on nationalist lines, privileges nationalist discourse: Independence Day, for instance, is celebrated with great pomp in all three
countries. Coincidentally, Independence Day for India falls on the very same day as VJ Day – 15 August (Pakistan’s is a day earlier, 14 August). And independence for India and Pakistan follows exactly two years after the end of the Second World War, in 1947. This reveals how integral the war had been in escalating the end of the Raj, and in bringing about the simultaneous – and violent – creation of two nation states. The Second World War profoundly affected the physical and psychological landscape of undivided India. However, VJ Day today has come to symbolise victory for Europe and its American allies – the lives of over five million non-white participants are not remembered or represented in the narrative of this war.

Lost somewhere between the pages of decolonisation and nationalism lies the fact that two-and-a-half million men from undivided India – most of them volunteers – fought in the Second World War. Indian animal transport companies accompanied the British Expeditionary Force to France at the start of the war in September 1939 and were evacuated from Dunkirk, along with British troops. Indian soldiers were present in nearly every single theatre of war – Italy, North Africa, the Middle East, Singapore and Burma – fighting alongside British and imperial troops, and forming the core of a global army.

Photograph © Public domain
Here, we see a familiar photograph of Churchill, making the popular ‘V’ sign, with his index and middle finger extended – a symbol for victory over Axis powers. (He isn’t being rude, incidentally – he just hadn’t realised at this point that the ‘V’ sign made with the palm facing inward could be rude.) First used by Churchill in July 1941, this gesture of defiance and solidarity rapidly became popular among millions across the world.

![Photograph](image)

*Photograph © Imperial War Museums*

Here, we have an Indian soldier making the same ‘V’ sign from the porthole of a ship in December 1941 on which he was being sent from India to Singapore. Unlike Churchill, we do not know the identity of this soldier. All we know of him comes from a brief caption from the Ministry of Information’s Second World War Official Collection of Photographs, stored at the Imperial War Museums – “his ‘V’ is backed by a million Indian troops and the rest of the Empire as well.”
With the appropriation of a well-recognised visual symbol, this unknown Indian soldier is staking a claim to his own presence in, and experience of, the Second World War. The Ministry of Information’s caption indicates that the way the war was perceived during the 1940s was very different to how it is remembered today. The unknown Indian soldier’s victory sign is heralded in the caption as a symbol of the loyalty and participation in the war of not just Indian men, but as a representative of Empire itself, and its millions of non-white people. Of course, the Ministry of Information, the British government’s carefully controlled channel of war communications, would have been keen to represent all imperial forces as fighting under a united flag – or symbol, in this case. And it is clearly because the symbol worked for British propaganda purposes that this photograph exists in the archives at all.

This photograph, then, demonstrates the hierarchies of colonial power: in the physical presence of the unknown Indian soldier on a ship docking in at Singapore; in his employment of a popular visual symbol denoting his participation in the British Indian Army; and in how silent the archives are about his personal wartime experience, although we can make some guesses.

In late 1941 and early 1942, Britain suffered some of its greatest losses to Japan, which rapidly took over Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaya and Burma in the start of the South-east Asian theatre of the war. There were heavy casualties, and about 85,000 British, Australian and Indian troops became prisoners-of-war. So it is unlikely that this Indian soldier ever saw his home again. The archives do not even provide us with his name. His presence in history rests entirely on the fragile premise of a colonial photographer’s lens recording a soldier’s loyalty to Empire. Reconstructing him into the narrative of the Second World War is therefore problematic because the very framework within which his involvement in the war has been recorded is a colonial one.

The war experience in undivided India fundamentally changed the nature of the subcontinent. It brought in its tumultuous wake decolonisation and the end of Empire, famine, Partition and communal violence, and the birth of two nation
states. What was it like being part of the colonial machinery of war at a time when nationalist politics was at its strongest?

In this paper, I will briefly discuss two incidents from the wartime experience of Captain Birendranath Mazumdar, a non-combatant in the army, whose interview is stored at the sound archives at the Imperial War Museums. The first of these incidents – Biren’s encounter with the leader of the Indian National Army, Subhas Chandra Bose in Germany – will reflect on the oppositional pulls of newborn nationalism with loyalty to the Empire as employer. The second – Biren’s confrontation with a British officer in India who refuses to let Biren’s family enter a first-class train compartment – will consider how imperial subjugation worked on the lines of a racist ideology, and how this could be subverted.

Captain Birendranath Mazumdar was a qualified doctor who signed up for the Royal Army Medical Corps and was posted in Etaples in France in 1939, where he was taken prisoner by the Germans. From the interview recording, he sounds as though he resisted complying with German authorities on a regular basis, which led to him being placed in solitary confinement and moved across 17 prisoner-of-war camps, until he was finally sent off to Colditz Castle, an infamous prisoner-of-war camp for officers at the heart of Hitler’s Third Reich.
This is Colditz Castle.

Photograph © Public domain

Photograph © The Colditz Association
The grainy photograph you see here was taken for a prisoner-of-war newsletter, just before Biren and some others were taken to Colditz. It is quite evident who Biren is here – on the top row, the last man on the right, the only non-white prisoner in the photograph.

Biren remained the only non-white prisoner in Colditz too, and describes his uneasy relationship here with other British officers. Military and colonial hierarchies are firmly entrenched, even among those who are meant to be on the same side: Biren is made to salute a senior British officer every time they speak as they both “belong to the King’s army”, and instructed not to fraternise with the Germans. He, in fact, is repeatedly asked by the Germans to defect, to join his countrymen and fight the British – a response to the growing swell of Indian nationalism and the armed resistance to the British Raj, led by Subhas Chandra Bose. But for Biren, Subhas’s contact with the Germans makes word get around about him, Biren, being a German spy, making his life unbearable at the camp.

Biren is eventually sent off on a train to Berlin to meet “someone” – he is not told whom, but is given a ticket to travel first-class (much to the surprise of German officers on the same compartment), and driven in a Mercedes to a well-appointed house. The “someone” he meets is Subash Chandra Bose himself.
Here is Subhas Chandra Bose, as he is generally depicted in Indian nationalist discourse.

Photograph © India Today, January 2016

And here is another picture of him – a less deified image – at his writing table.

This strange meeting between Biren and Subhas takes on an almost surreal dimension. Biren describes how Subhas and he spent a long time looking at each other, not saying anything. Both men come from the same part of India – Bengal – and the conversation initially takes place in Bengali, their mother tongue. They discuss people they know back at home, their relatives and friends – this could be a conversation taking place between two Bengali gentlemen in the living room of a mutual friend's house in India. Instead, it is a recruitment tactic that fails.

When Subhas, the leader of the armed uprising against the British, and Biren, the wartime doctor in the British Indian Army, don their political identities again, their linguistic register switches to English. Biren is asked to defect and join the Indian National Army. "I was one of those who disliked British rule in India
because I had seen in my country the oppression of the British," explains Biren in the interview. But he does not switch allegiance; instead he responds: "Mr Bose, I cannot, and I would not... You had the opportunity to resign and then you escaped from India. I haven’t had the opportunity to resign. And anyway, I was taught since I was a child by my father that a promise once made, verbal or written, you have got to abide by, no matter what happens." Subhas is disappointed; Biren is sent back to Colditz, this time travelling third class.

This encounter subverts the textbook story of 'the Good War', where Allied forces defeat the Nazis and in which non-European volunteers are almost entirely ignored. Instead, it reveals a complex negotiation of political and personal identities within the simultaneous and shifting landscape of motivation among colonised people. Biren refuses to join the Indian National Army, but that does not mean he has no nationalist feelings, nor does it signify that he has imperialist sympathies. Despite being accused of being a German spy, and despite the considerably more comfortable life he could lead by defecting – evidenced by the luxury of his train and car travel en route to meeting Subhas – he chooses to return to being an Indian officer imprisoned at Colditz. Biren believes in adhering to his oath of loyalty to the Empire, but above all, by not capitulating to either German or Indian persuasion, he claims the right to his own agency. He volunteers to join the British Indian Army out of choice, and he chooses not to leave it.

I will let Biren speak to you in his own voice. Here is a short clip of Biren’s interview, archived at the Imperial War Museum in London. Here, Biren describes his meeting with Subhas Chandra Bose.

[Play sound clip from IWM recording]

The second colonial encounter I will discuss takes place at the end of the war. In 1945, a free Biren is sent with Indian troops to Gaya, a city in northern India. Here, his brother, his brother’s wife and young daughter are forced off the first-class compartment of the Bombay Mail, going from Gaya to Calcutta, by a British
sergeant major. An indignant Biren uses his higher military rank of officer to make the sergeant major stand to attention, and challenges this decision. Biren later has to report to the British Indian Army headquarters in Ranchi, another Indian town, to explain his 'bad behaviour', but no charges are brought against him. Biren explains this as a consequence of being the superior officer in the situation.

The Second World War saw a gradual Indianisation of the officer class in the British Indian Army, and this provides a powerful counterpoint to colonial dominance and the hitherto unquestionable superiority of whiteness. Does military hierarchy, then, become a tool for subverting colonial ideology? Biren’s uniform, given to him by the imperial British Army as a mark of recognition of his status as officer, becomes here an instrument of power against an imperialist ideology. But it is not the uniform alone. Biren has survived his war service and 17 prisoner-of-war camps, and it is a combination of these factors that enables him to subvert imperial ideology. Because of Britain’s great need for Indian men and resources, the Second World War, then, was also able to create such empowering spaces, spaces of challenge to the domination of Empire.

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