British Journal for Military History

Volume 7, Issue 3, November 2021

Review of *The Coolie's Great War: Indian Labour in a Global Conflict, 1914-1921* by Radhika Singha

Erica Wald

ISSN: 2057-0422

Date of Publication: 25 November 2021

Citation: Erica Wald, 'Review of *The Coolie's Great War: Indian Labour in a Global Conflict, 1914-1921* by Radhika Singha', *British Journal for Military History*, 7.3 (2021), pp. 159-161.

www.bjmh.org.uk

The BJMH is produced with the support of Goldsmiths UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

might win the peace. Described here as 'the war after the war', some of these proposals still have ramifications today.

This study reveals that Wilson was a far more nuanced character than previously believed and reveals his role as the prime mover behind the establishment of the SWC. Not only has Spencer gone some way to redeem Wilson's somewhat tarnished reputation, he has provided a masterly exposition of his influence over Allied military strategy in the final year of the war. The interaction between politicians and the military is seen at close quarters. This book is an indispensable guide for anyone with an interest in how war policy was formulated during the First World War.

PAUL HARRIS
Independent Scholar, UK
DOI 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v7i3.1579

Radhika Singha, *The Coolie's Great War: Indian Labour in a Global Conflict, 1914-1921*. London: Hurst & Company, 2020. 392 pp. ISBN 978-1787382152 (hardback). Price £45.

By the end of 1919, over 1.4 million Indians had served in the war. Of this number, 563,369 were followers or non-combatants. The demand for their labour was constant. 'Coolies', supposedly unskilled menial labourers, filled these ranks and form the focus of Radhika Singha's richly detailed and compelling *The Coolie's Great War: Indian Labour in a Global Conflict, 1914-1921*. Indian followers served myriad essential roles including *kahars* (stretcher-bearers), *syces* (grooms and grasscutters), *mehtars* (latrine cleaners) and *drabis* (mule-drivers). The 'Coolie Corps' performed both porterage and construction work. In all, non-combatant labour formed a critical, though hitherto ignored, structure of the war.

In the past twenty years, historians have increasingly argued the ways in which the First World War must be understood as a global conflict. Whether this was through the experiences of the one million Indian sepoys who served in the conflict or a broader reframing of the war as a one among global empires, our understanding of the war has been reframed. Moreover, as Bruno Cabanes has argued, while the Armistice in Europe was agreed in November 1918, related regional conflicts continued beyond this date. Radhika Singha's work is a valuable contribution to this debate, addressing the global flows of labour in and beyond the European war. Singha shows how these frameworks, or regimes of labour, sustained the military infrastructure of the British Empire in India and, we can extrapolate, across and behind conflict lines.

A key focus of the book is the geographies of labour – globally and within India – during the war. Using a wide range of archival sources, Singha details recruitment patterns; debates over caste, race and the composition of the corps; and the internal geopolitics which both informed and was reinforced by recruitment. As the war intensified, so too did the demand for followers. Recruiters turned to contested tracts along India's land frontiers – the United Provinces, North-West Frontier Province, Afghanistan and areas between Assam and Burma were tapped for war service. Labour was recruited extensively from even the most thinly populated hill tracts, with recruitment from these areas serving a two-fold purpose. First, it went some way to satisfy the calls for labour, but second, and significantly for rule within India, it was a move by the colonial government to demonstrate the hold its officers held over the hill tribes, thus demarcating inner borders in the region.

By 1916, followers were in such short supply that there was a move made to increase pay (though not, it seems, to address the gruelling conditions in which they worked). In an attempt to attract new recruits, a Central Follower Depot was established in Meerut and salaries were allowed to rise. At the same time, reflecting the realisation of the absolute dependence of the army on this legion of labourers, the image of the unskilled bazaar follower also began to shift.

Indian followers served in every theatre of war, with an overwhelming number serving in Mesopotamia. Sepoys and followers remained in Iraq long after the Armistice, involved as they were in crushing the Arab uprising which followed the war. As Singha shows, not all of this labour was 'free'. The Indian Labour Corps (ILC) was joined in Iraq by over fifteen thousand 'volunteer' prisoners, mainly in the Jail Porter and Labour Corps, who were even more susceptible to exploitation and violence than their free peers. This 'volunteer' group of prison labourers was thrust into Mesopotamia to serve as, among other things, latrine-cleaners in the midst of a cholera outbreak. However, prison recruitment alone could not meet the needs of the army, leading some to suggest the use of impressment to make up numbers. However, this came as indentured labour was restricted and the Home Office resisted this suggestion, arguing that such impressment would be politically detrimental.

While the 'homecoming' of Indian soldiers is often (briefly) mentioned in histories of Indian nationalism, Singha focuses on what this return meant in practice for soldiers and non-combatants. Following long years of service, sepoys and followers returned to face the same forms of discrimination as before the war. Non-combatants, working without rest in Mesopotamia were denied leave requests, while the Maharaja of Bikaner complained that his officers were refused entry to the British officers' mess on board the ship which brought them back to India after nearly five years of service.

The book is an important and timely contribution to the history of the First World War. Not only does it build on the growing body of literature on India's contribution to the war, but it speaks to the importance of recognising the global body of non-combatants who served, but rarely form the focus of commemorations or histories.

ERICA WALD
Goldsmiths, University of London, UK
DOI 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v7i3.1580

Michael Robinson, *Shell-shocked British Army Veterans in Ireland, 1918–39: A Difficult Homecoming*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020. xiv + 253 pp. ISBN: 978-1526140050 (hardback). Price £80.

Michael Robinson's book makes a valuable contribution to two fields of study that have seen significant attention over the last decade or so: the treatment of physically and mentally disabled British ex-servicemen during and after the Great War, and the experiences of Irish veterans returning home from that war. Both are potentially difficult areas of study, if for different reasons. 'Neurasthenia' was potentially wide-ranging and ill-defined, while, unlike physical injuries, diagnosis was often subjective. Records are also comparably scant. A focus on Ireland – where conflict continued after 1918 and the island was ultimately partitioned into two new jurisdictions – brings additional complications. Robinson has done a fine job in meeting these challenges.

The book 'considers, contextualises and comprehends the lived experiences of disabled people in a past society' (p. 6). Its primary focus is on the treatment of shell-shocked veterans in Ireland. The opening chapters are chronological. Chapter 1 examines attitudes to mental illness and to the Irish soldier during the war, followed by Chapters 2 and 3 which treat the veteran experience and official policy in Ireland before and after partition. Chapters 4 and 5 offer case studies of the Richmond and Belfast war hospitals and the Service Patient scheme respectively.

The disabled Irish veteran is worthy of focused study because, as Robinson points out, the social and political context in Ireland was markedly different to Britain. Wider social stigma surrounding mental illness could be exacerbated by pre-existing prejudices, unfounded but regularly articulated in official circles, that regarded the Irish soldier as child-like, as more prone to emotional instability, and more susceptible to breakdown and shell-shock. After the Great War, the Irish War of Independence (1919–21) and Civil War (1922–3) hindered efforts to rehabilitate ex-servicemen, with disruption to transport and government infrastructure, the personal risk faced by staff