

India and World War II: War, Armed Forces, and Society, 1939-45 by Kaushik Roy, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. xxi + 402, INR 1,645

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World War II (1939-45) was a watershed moment in modern world history. It drastically changed the social and political map of the world, and especially of the Indian subcontinent which was under colonial rule at that time. Several significant works have appeared in recent times on the diverse aspects of the war. Among them is Kaushik Roy's authoritative account, *India and World War II: War, Armed Forces, and Society, 1939-45*.

It has been well argued that the dominant historical narratives of World War II have been predominantly Eurocentric. India has received relatively less critical attention in terms of its contribution to and participation in the war. Roy's book asserts strongly that India underwent extraordinary and irreversible changes between 1939 and 1945. The entire environment of the subcontinent underwent change as thousands of natives put on the military uniform to fight in places like West Asia, Malaya, Burma, Iraq, Iran, Syria, North and East Africa, Sicily, mainland Italy, Greece, Crete, Cyprus, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somaliland. India was the dividing line between two theatres of war—in the West, against Germany, and in the East, against Japan.

Roy begins by stating that World War II remains a defining chapter in modern world history (p.1). Colonial India's involvement in the war

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has often been studied against the backdrop of the ongoing freedom struggle, the varying attitudes of the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League, and the formation of the Azad Hind Fauj under Subhas Chandra Bose. Moving beyond the claims of how Indian resources and soldiers aided the Allies in winning the war, this volume explores the complex yet intriguing interrelationship between the Indian armed forces, Indian society, and World War II (p. 4).

Rather than merely providing a chronological account of military operations, Roy highlights ideas and institutions of violence within the prevalent social and cultural contexts in India during those turbulent years. He further asserts that nationalism was not a strong sentiment among the Indian soldiers involved in the war, as they were quite content with the British military service and the notion of nationalism was still ambivalent and ambiguous to them (p. 60).

This fascinating story has been described in seven chapters. The blueprint of modern India emerged from a context in which the backwardness of India as a British colony was highlighted by official perceptions of the coming war in 1939. The Chatfield Report of 1938 pointed out that the Indian armed forces were split around this time. This was proved correct in the rapid Japanese conquest of Malaya and Singapore in 1942. The author argues that no one in 1939 could have foreseen the transformation of India during the war. *India and World War II* is an attempt to describe this process, which produced a new and confident India as a consequence of India's associations with the war. Paradoxically, this new-found confidence and belief in their own abilities as national people stemmed not from the nationalist movements aimed against the war, but from the professional experience they gained during a war, which was essentially Britain's war against the Axis powers (pp. 161–65).

The first chapter shows how the Raj was able to construct a multi-ethnic volunteer army without resorting to conscription. It also shows how the mercenary tradition inherent in the Indian society was utilised by the British to raise 2.5 million men in wartime. The other factor that aided the Raj in acquiring military manpower from both the so-called martial as well as non-martial races was the vast demographic resources of India and the relatively underdeveloped agrarian economy.

Chapter 2 argues that the rising demands for industrial products in wartime, along with the failure of the British capitalists to meet this demand, forced a reluctant Raj to set up an industrial infrastructure in

India. The ordnance factories upgraded their technology and expanded the volume of output of war-related industrial goods. The total war also gave scope to Indian industrialists to expand their range of activities. Thus, quantitative and qualitative development of weapons somewhat raised the readiness of the Indian troops during the latter part of World War II.

Chapter 3 probes the interrelationship between the 'will to combat' and military discipline. How, in the absence of nationalist ideology, the Indian soldiers were motivated to fight and die in the age of total war is a puzzle which is partly unravelled in this chapter. In general, it is argued that when soldiers are alienated from the general values of the society which spawns them, they are not willing to risk their lives in the battlefield. It is known that in the 1930s and 1940s, India was imbued with anti-British/colonial nationalist ideology. Still, there was no dearth of Indian recruits and they fought for the British. There were no large-scale rebellions against the Raj among the Indian military personnel either. This chapter also shows that by providing tangible and non-tangible incentives to the 'martial' jawans, the British were quite able to separate the soldiery from the host society. Military discipline further converted the agricultural labourers in the ranks into a sort of automaton, and racial/ethnic pride partly enabled the Indian soldiery to encounter the brutal 'face of battle'.

The fourth chapter highlights how the Indian Army policed the Raj and suppressed indigenous armed uprisings. Also, the fourth, fifth and sixth chapters integrate institutional, technical, and tactical-operational ideas to assess the combat effectiveness of the Indian Army in the battlefields of Asia, Africa, and Europe (Italy).

Chapter 5 shows how the techniques of small war, which the Indian Army had learned in the North-West Frontier, aided it while combating the Italians in East Africa. Intensive training and combined arms techniques enabled the India Army to drive back Erwin Rommel's Afrika Korps. Finally, training for mounting warfare under modern conditions allowed the three Indian divisions to breach the much-vaunted Gustav and Gothic lines in 1944. The participation of the Indian Army in defeating the once-mighty Wehrmacht (the German armed forces during World War II) surely is a high watermark in Indian military history.

The tactical, institutional, technical as well as the operational aspects of the Indian Army in the battle-fields of Hong-Kong, Malaya and Singapore have been aptly described in Chapter 6. It also highlights how

the Indian Army was defeated by the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) in 1942. In this respect, Roy argues that though the Indian Army was well trained in desert warfare, the tactics of jungle warfare by the Nipponese soldiers in Malaya and Burma regions went against them. (p. 235). This monograph thus argues that the Indian Army had been prepared for the wrong war.

Chapter 7 deals with the Burma campaign, between 1942 and 1945, that proved to be significant for the Indian Army. Since 1943, the Indian Army received rigorous, tactical and innovative military training under the India Command, especially the General Headquarters (GHQ) and South East Asia Command (SEAC). These creative rigorous training sessions were able to enhance military and combat professionalism among the Indian soldiers for the long exquisite victory in the Burma campaign during late 1944 and early 1945.

Based on archival data, the book focuses on understanding the impact of large-scale mobilisation of manpower and resources on an underdeveloped agrarian society; the communities which joined the Indian armed forces; why the Indian soldiers remained loyal to the Raj; and how they defeated the Japanese in Burma and the Italians and the Germans in Italy and Africa (pp. 5, 360–83). By presenting beyond the simple cause-effect of the global war, Roy, one of India's best military historians, has produced an authoritative account of the years 1939–45, which adequately addresses the contemporary socio-political and economic issues in minute details so as to understand the overall situation of the greatest colony of the British Empire.

This book is a cross between 'traditional military history' (a study of campaigns, tactics, leadership) and 'new military history' (the impact of warfare on society and culture). It is hoped that it will encourage further research into the subject, as well as provide an informative and analytical read to those interested in the conduct of World War II, and subsequently, the Partition of India. The corpus of Indian military history put together by post-war historians, such as Srinath Raghavan, Chandar Sundaram, Daniel Marston, T.R. Moreman, Tarak Barkawi, David Omissi, and Yasmin Khan, among others, is duly acknowledged by Roy.