

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-50984-8 - Race, Empire and First World War Writing

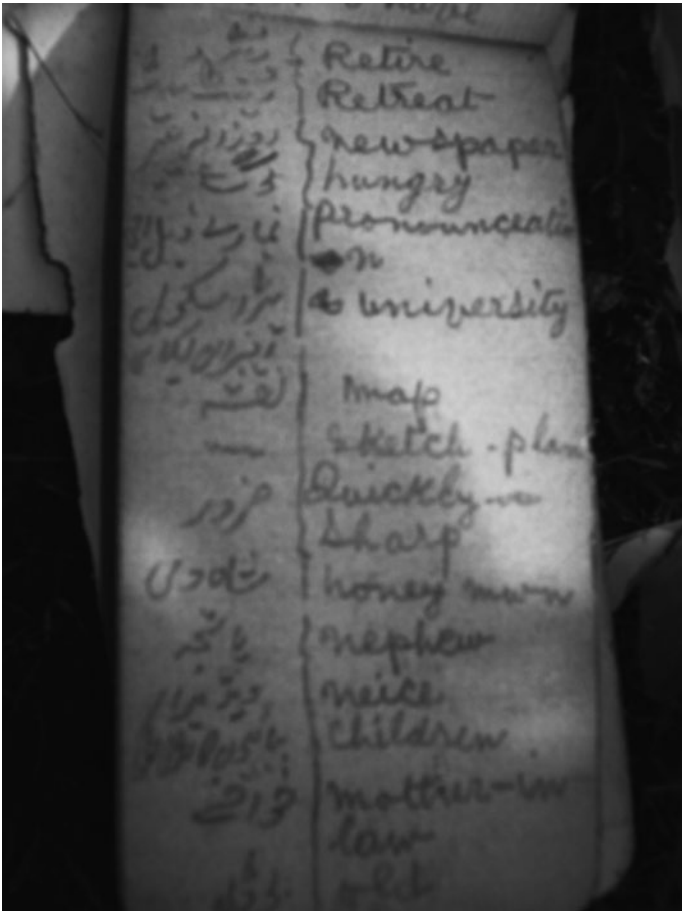
Edited by Santanu Das

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction**Santanu Das*

On the rainy night of 2/3 March 1915, Jemadar Mir Mast, an Indian soldier serving in the 58th Vaughan's Rifles (Bareilly Brigade) at Neuve Chapelle, deserted and quietly crossed over to the German side with a group of fellow Pathans. Mir Mast was an enterprising man. It is believed that he became part of a *jihad* mission from Germany, and Anglo-Indian myth has it that the Kaiser decorated him with the Iron Cross.¹ Because of the exceptional nature of the event, his trench notebook is now housed in the National Archives in Delhi, contained in a hitherto sealed envelope marked 'His Majesty's Office'.² It is a curious document. Along with a hand-drawn trench map, some casual jottings and numbers, it comprises a long list of words, first in Urdu and then in English. The words range from the functional ('haversack', 'blanket', 'please') to the warmly human ('hungry', 'nephew', 'honeymoon') to the robustly earthy ('testacles' [*sic*], 'brests' [*sic*]) (Figure 1). This tantalising and hitherto unknown 'diary' (as referred to in the National Archives catalogue) – a rare, if not the only surviving, example of a trench notebook by an Indian soldier of the First World War – raises a number of broad questions. What do we know about the daily lived war experience of these men from the former colonies and from different racial and ethnic groups? How were they perceived by the white soldiers and civilians and what was the degree of contact between them within and outside the war zone? Is Mir Mast to be remembered as an imperial deserter, a transnational *jihadist* or, with hindsight, as an anti-colonial nationalist – and what do these categories tell us about the nature of war memory, and its relation to subsequent historical events or shifts in political consciousness? These questions, among others – in various national, racial and socio-cultural contexts – lie at the heart of this book.

The volume examines the racial and colonial aspects of the war of 1914–18. The wider aim is to embed the experience and memory of the First World War in a more multiracial and international framework. The contours of the 'Great War and modern memory' start to look different if,



1. A page from the trench notebook of Jemadar Mir Mast

instead of the writings of an ordinary European soldier, let alone a Wilfred Owen or an Erich Maria Remarque, we take the memories of an Indian sepoy, a Chinese worker or an African *askari*. There has been a steadily growing interest within the academy, particularly in recent years, in the colonial and African American experiences of the conflict.³ But in spite of important work being done on such aspects, the social and cultural history of the war continues to maintain a neat symmetry to the war itself: the non-European aspects, like the non-European sites of battle, remain ‘sideshow’. While there has been some excellent work on the experience of individual

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-50984-8 - Race, Empire and First World War Writing

Edited by Santanu Das

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

racial groups or the contribution of the former colonies, a need has increasingly been felt to think through some of these issues in a comparative and cross-disciplinary framework.

The impulses behind the present collection of essays are both recuperative and analytical. The volume seeks variously to recover and analyse the war experience of the combatants and non-combatants from the former colonies and dominions, as well as of particular ethnic and racial groups from outside the colonial empires, such as the Chinese and the African Americans. At the same time, it also examines the different discourses – pan-European, national, racial or socio-cultural – surrounding their participation, moments of interracial contact, processes of post-war memory and literary representations. Given the wide range of the subject and sources, the essays are methodologically heterogeneous, but they are united by certain common themes and concerns. In this Introduction, I briefly indicate the scale and the intensity of the conflict for some of the various groups involved before going on to discuss particular issues arising out of this volume: the nature of the source materials and the challenges such material poses to scholars working in the field, the ways in which ‘race’ and ‘empire’ have been explored here and the variants of their relationship, and points of contiguity and difference among the histories the individual chapters examine.

In 1906, in a fictional narrative, the German writer F.H. Grautoff warned that ‘a war in Europe . . . must necessarily set the whole world ablaze’.⁴ This was no Eurocentric boast. In 1914, Great Britain and France controlled the two largest colonial empires, and they would draw on them extensively during the war for both human and material resources. At the time, as Hew Strachan notes, ‘war for Europe meant war for the world’; the whole of Africa, except Ethiopia and Liberia, was under European rule, and the first shot fired by a soldier in British service was in Togoland in Africa.⁵ India, along with other parts of the British empire including the (white) dominions, entered the war on 4 August 1914, and on the same day the French war minister Messimy ordered the transport of ten West African battalions to France. On 7 August, French and British troops invaded German Togoland, and by 25 August they had destroyed the German wireless station at Kamina. Before the month was out, Japan had started making preparations for the capture of Tsingtao, and on 30 August New Zealand occupied Samoa. Over the next four years, fighting would take place in Europe, Africa and the Middle East, with brief excursions into Central Asia and the Far East. The litany of place names often becomes the marker of the ‘world’ nature of the First World War. Place names and

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-50984-8 - Race, Empire and First World War Writing

Edited by Santanu Das

Excerpt

[More information](#)

battlefields remain sites of great importance and emotion, but as various social and cultural histories of the 1914–18 conflict have shown, the war can no longer be reduced to just battles.

The global reverberations of what at the time Germany alone, among the European nations, called the ‘*world war*’ (Weltkrieg) become apparent as we substitute people, processes and effects of the war for places and events. Even a narrow view of ‘numbers’ and their movements across countries and continents suggests the scale of international upheaval. Among the various colonies of the British empire, India contributed the largest number of men, with approximately 1.4 million recruited during the war up to December 1919.⁶ The dominions – including Canada, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and Newfoundland – contributed a further 1.3 million men.⁷ New Zealand’s mobilisation of more than 100,000 men may seem relatively small compared to India’s, but in proportionate terms New Zealand made one of the largest contributions in the British empire, with 5 per cent of its men aged 15–49 killed.⁸ In addition to the 90,000 *troupes indigènes* already under arms when the war started, France recruited between 1914 and 1918 nearly 500,000 colonial troops including 166,000 West Africans, 46,000 Madagascans, 50,000 Indochinese, 140,000 Algerians, 47,000 Tunisians and 24,300 Moroccans.⁹ Most of these French colonial troops served in Europe. However, the majority of the Africans served as labourers or carriers in Africa. In total, over 2 million Africans were involved in the conflict as soldiers or labourers; 10 per cent of them died, and among the labourers serving in Africa, the death rates may have been as high as 20 per cent.¹⁰ On the other hand, nearly 140,000 Chinese contract labourers were hired by the British and French governments, forming a substantial part of the immigrant labour force working in France during the war.¹¹ With the entry of the United States into the war, nearly 400,000 African American troops were inducted into the US forces, of whom 200,000 served in Europe.¹² Even by conservative estimates, the total number of non-white men, combatants and non-combatants, mobilised into the European and American armies during the First World War comes to well over four million, though not all of them saw active service.¹³

In a grotesque reversal of Joseph Conrad’s novelistic vision, hundreds of thousands of non-white men were voyaging to the heart of whiteness, as it were, to witness ‘The horror! The horror!’ of Western warfare. ‘This is not war. It is the ending of the world,’ wrote a wounded Indian sepoy from England.¹⁴ The war also resulted in an unprecedented range of interracial and cross-cultural encounters, experiences and intimacies. There were vast movements of men outside Europe: among others, more than half a million

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-50984-8 - Race, Empire and First World War Writing

Edited by Santanu Das

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

Indians were sent to Mesopotamia, over a million African labourers, particularly carriers, were recruited from different parts of Africa for the East African campaign, and there was the famous expedition of the Australians and New Zealanders to Gallipoli in April 1915. For the different dominions, colonies and racial groups around the globe, the war experience was profoundly transformative at different levels: from Australia coming to 'know itself' as a nation, as Charles Bean noted, during the war to remote towns such as Invercargill at the southernmost tip of New Zealand or small villages in India and Africa opening up to the wider world.¹⁵ What are often considered sideshows in the grand European narrative of the war were momentous events with enduring consequences for the local communities. Nor, for many of these groups, did the war – at the basic, physical level – end with the Armistice. For two weeks after the guns fell silent on the Western Front, the wily German commander General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck carried on his campaign in East Africa. In Europe, Chinese labourers started clearing up the battlefields of the Western Front, and French African troops stationed in the Ruhr region till early 1921 became the target of vicious racist propaganda. The German sociologist Max Weber had complained about 'an army of niggers, Ghurkhas and all the barbarians of the world'.¹⁶ This volume is about them, as well as their brethren from Ireland and the dominions, including Maori, Aboriginal Australians and the First Nations Canadians.¹⁷

The essays are heterogeneous in method. Some of the chapters recover the war experiences of marginalised racial groups through fresh material, some are more discursively developed examinations of the war experience within European, national or racial contexts, some are critical readings of the literary records of these experiences or analyses of post-war memory. This methodological diversity – encouraged by the nature of the subject – is something the volume wishes to highlight as an important dimension of collaborative, cross-disciplinary scholarship. The plurality becomes particularly important in an area where the archives are often more than ordinarily silent, where the range of sources is complex and sometimes beyond the limits of traditional historical enquiry, and where the structures of knowledge and levels of existing scholarship vary widely. The authors here are drawn from different disciplines – history, colonial studies, literary criticism, sociology and modern languages. Scholars who have already written on the war experience of particular countries or racial groups revisit the topic from fresh perspectives.

The book is divided into three parts. While a drive towards the historical recovery of the war experiences of non-white communities in Europe, as

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-50984-8 - Race, Empire and First World War Writing

Edited by Santanu Das

Excerpt

[More information](#)

well as in Mesopotamia and East Africa, characterises the essays in Part I ('Voices and experiences') of the volume, the essays in Part II ('Perceptions and proximities') document and analyse the different sites and contexts of interracial proximity or contact. The essays in Part III ('Nationalism, memory and literature') – dealing with predominantly English-speaking former colonies, dominions or racial groups (such as African Americans) whose war experiences are relatively better-documented – engage with processes of remembrance and literary representation, and their relation to national, racial or cultural identity. These chapters address the construction of war memory and its shifting nature, as when imperial war service accretes with time layers of nationalist meaning, like the 'Anzac legend' (discussed in Chapter 11 by Peter Stanley), or when the rhetoric of the war is appropriated for the fight for racial equality, as with the African American writers of the Harlem Renaissance (as examined in Chapter 15 by Mark Whalan).

In recent years, two parallel events have been taking place in the European theatre of the Great War and public remembrance: we are witnessing the demise of the last handful of European war veterans; at the same time, the colonial non-white participants are slowly being wheeled in from the shadowy chambers of modern memory. The opening of the Memorial Gates at Hyde Park Corner in London in 2002 to commemorate the services of the Indian subcontinent, Africa and the Caribbean to the two world wars, the increased space devoted to the South African Native Labour Corps in the museum for South African troops in Delville Wood in France, or the exhibition 'Man–Culture–War: Multicultural Aspects of the First World War' (2008) at In Flanders Fields Museum, Ypres are striking examples.¹⁸ Within the academy, there has been a swell of interest in the transnational or global aspects of the conflict: two classic examples are the two-volume *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin, 1914–1919* (1999 and 2007) edited by Jay Winter and Jean Louis Roberts, and Hew Strachan's *The First World War: To Arms* (2001).¹⁹ If some of the earliest accounts to highlight the colonial contributions were celebratory imperial histories,²⁰ in recent years scholars such as Charles Balesi, Myron Echenberg, Richard Fogarty, David Killingray, John Morrow, Marc Michel, David Omissi, Melvin Page and Tyler Stovall – and including many of the contributors to the present volume – have pioneered research into the colonial and racial dimensions of the conflict.²¹ While such works have illuminated fresh areas of experience, these colonial histories are often so complex and intricate that they become specialised and independent spheres of scholarship. *Race, Empire and First World War Writing* at once

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-50984-8 - Race, Empire and First World War Writing

Edited by Santanu Das

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

demonstrates the kinds of work that are being done in the field and intends to open up a space for discussion and dialogue. While most of the essays focus on particular groups or countries, the volume collectively explores patterns of similarity and difference across them.

In 2003, Gail Braybon noted that ‘more words have been written about the British war poets than about all the non-white troops put together’.²² Eurocentrism is, however, only one part of the problem; the fact remains that the war poets have written more words about the conflict than all the non-white troops put together. As Paul J. Bailey notes in Chapter 1 of this volume, ‘“An Army of Workers”: Chinese indentured labour in First World War France’, ‘how are we to capture the voices of the workers themselves given the paucity of written records?’²³ Often recruited from non-literate or semi literate backgrounds, these men have not left behind the letters, poems and memoirs that form the cornerstone of European war memory. Bakary Diallo’s *Force Bonté* (1926) is the only published memoir by a *tirailleur sénégalais*, just as Rihana Karkeek’s *Home Sweet Home* (2003) is the only published diary so far about the Maori war experience; Mulk Raj Anand’s *Across the Black Waters* (1939) is the only Indian ‘Great War novel’. An important source is the substantial collection of censored letters of the colonial troops and workers, and reports of the postal censors, but they are a particular kind of evidence and raise particular problems. Increasingly, a need is being felt to go beyond the official archives. In African history, scholars such as Charles Balesi and Joe Lunn have made extensive use of oral interviews of war veterans. Similarly, South Asian scholars have started to draw on a wider base of material, including prisoner-of-war camp journals and the voice-recordings of over two thousand POWs in Germany done by the Prussian Ethnographic Commission.²⁴ Essays in the present volume address a variety of sources – personal testimonies including letters, diaries, and freshly unearthed (and translated) memoirs, government archives, contemporary publications, literature, songs, interviews, photographs, film and public memorials. There is an impulse in the volume towards the recovery of the individual voices, the intimate accounts, which have so far been marginalised or silenced in public and official accounts, but different kinds of evidence are read alongside each other, wherever possible.

The essays collected here fall broadly within the sphere of social and cultural history and literary criticism, and in different ways, they all underline the need for greater specificity and nuance. While the focus is on questions of colonialism and race, the chapters explore how these two factors operate in conjunction with issues such as gender, class, cultural identity, nationality, religion and military rank. Non-white troops and

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-50984-8 - Race, Empire and First World War Writing

Edited by Santanu Das

Excerpt

[More information](#)

non-combatants faced racism in a variety of situations but such experiences need to be contextualised. There are some pan-European affinities but also distinct differences. The institutional racism of the British army – its refusal to promote the colonial soldiers beyond a certain rank or its politics of segregation (as with the South African Native Labour Corps in France or the Indian wounded in the Brighton Pavilion, England) – was different from the working-class racism faced by the Chinese workers in France in 1917. Moreover, European attitudes to the different races varied and there were many instances of individual kindness. Many of the colonial and African American troops spoke very warmly of their French hosts. Class, not race, argues Heather Jones in Chapter 9, 'Imperial captivities: colonial prisoners of war in Germany and the Ottoman empire, 1914–1918', was the scandal in Mesopotamia. Religion and place too played a part. Michèle Barrett in her Afterword ('Death and the afterlife – Britain's colonies and dominions') uncovers evidence from the archives of the Imperial War Graves Commission about its decision that West Indians – 'Negroes in West Indian Regiments' – were to be 'commemorated individually when buried in East Africa' for they were 'Christians' while for the native Africans, a policy of 'no individual commemoration' was to be followed.

The two terms in the book's title – 'empire' and 'race' (in the twentieth-century sense of 'colour', as explained more fully in the next section) – frequently overlap but they are by no means coterminous. The essays discuss the experiences of both non-white and white subjects of the empire to see how colonial war experience and memory differ across the colour line. At the same time, the volume draws in two other racial groups – the Chinese workers and African American troops – to examine how racial politics works outside the framework of colonial structures. While the issue of race connects the Chinese and the African Americans to the colonial non-white troops, how does their political status affect European attitudes towards them (interestingly, Chinese contract workers were referred to as 'colonial' or 'exotic' workers, as opposed to the term 'immigrant workers' used for non-French European workers) and indeed their war experience? The experience of these two groups alerts us against any neat conflation of the terms 'race' and 'empire' in spite of their frequent overlap. During the First World War, political status and nationality intersected with race to create a range of experiences. The experience of being colonised (like Indians or the Vietnamese) was substantially different from being a subjugated race within a self-governing dominion (like Aboriginal Australians) or within an independent nation (like African Americans). These widely varying axes on

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-50984-8 - Race, Empire and First World War Writing

Edited by Santanu Das

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

which non-white identities were forged in relation to the First World War created a range of similarities and differences in war experiences and post-war memory.

Given the magnitude of the subject, this volume neither is nor pretends to be comprehensive in any way; gaps are inevitable.²⁵ Instead, the fifteen chapters deal with a selected range of subjects and seek to create a platform for dialogue. In spite of the diversity in material and treatment, there are certain deep continuities and overlaps; narratives intersect. Recovery of wartime voices and experiences in Part I necessarily includes some investigation of the interracial perceptions developed in Part II, while both are carried forward in fresh contexts in discussions of post-war memory in Part III. In Chapter 1, Paul J. Bailey's examination of the Chinese war experience includes, alongside the workers' voices, the way they are represented, a point taken up by Dominiek Dendooven in Chapter 7, on 'Living apart together: Belgian civilians and non-white troops and workers in wartime Flanders' in Part II. Santanu Das's exploration of the Indian experience in Mesopotamia through Bengali letters and memoirs in Chapter 3, 'Indians at home, Mesopotamia and France, 1914–1918: towards an intimate history', similarly intersects with Heather Jones's account of the European discourses surrounding Mesopotamia in Chapter 9. The idea of radicalisation of soldiers and workers, implicit in different chapters in Part I of the volume, is developed by Richard Smith in Chapter 14 ('"Heaven grant you strength to fight the battle for your race": nationalism, Pan-Africanism and the First World War in Jamaican memory') and Mark Whalan in Chapter 15 ('Not only war: the First World War and African American literature'), both in Part III. Similarly, the theme of interracial contact is carried forward to Part III through Peter Stanley's investigation in Chapter 11 of Australian war experience in Gallipoli, Ceylon and Africa ('"He was black, he was a White man, and a dinkum Aussie": race and empire in revisiting the Anzac legend'). Racial discrimination and hierarchy, a recurring theme in the essays, is developed in a comparative context by Michèle Barrett in the Afterword through an exploration of the official commemoration of Indian, African and Canadian men. Her investigation of the archival records of the Imperial War Graves Commission shows that, in spite of proclamations of complete equality, its commemorative practices varied significantly. Such differences were made not just between the 'white' dominions and the 'coloured' colonies but involved intricate distinctions between the different colonies and racial groups, in conjunction with factors such as rank, location and religion.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-50984-8 - Race, Empire and First World War Writing

Edited by Santanu Das

Excerpt

[More information](#)

IO

SANTANU DAS

EMPIRE, RACE, COLOUR

The way in which the two terms in the book's title – 'empire' and 'race' – have been explored needs some explanation. If imperial rivalry was one of the causes of the conflict, the war led to the dissolution of empires: not only of the aspiring German empire, but of the older, vaster and multi-ethnic empires of Austro-Hungary, Russia and the Ottomans. Ethnic tension and conflict within wartime Europe, including the Armenian genocide in wartime Turkey, are big and complex areas which need separate studies and are beyond the framework of this volume.²⁶ In this collection, the focus is on the colonial empires of Great Britain, France, and Germany as well as on other racial groups, such as the Chinese and the African Americans. The term 'race' (as explained below) is used in its twentieth-century meaning to denote differences in skin colour while acknowledging its continuing complexity and fluidity (to denote ethnicity) during the war.

According to one native South African labourer, the most remarkable part of his war experience was 'to see the different kinds of human races from all parts of the world'.²⁷ This racial diversity on European soil was largely the result of French and British decisions to employ colonial non-white troops against Germany on the Western Front. For France, the war was the testing ground for General Mangin's theory of 'La force noire': the creation of a large reserve of African troops to counter France's demographic imbalance vis-à-vis Germany and use them for its own defence.²⁸ While France, with its assimilationist model, deployed these troops in Europe, a similar decision for Great Britain caused more soul-searching. The British had regularly used colonial troops for imperial defence but not in Europe or against other white races. Indian troops were not allowed to fight in the Boer War in South Africa (1899–1902). If a 'coloured' man was trained to raise arms against another European, what guarantee was there, so the thinking went, that he would not one day attack his own white master? However, after the heavy casualties suffered by the British Expeditionary Force in August 1914, two Indian divisions were diverted to France. Among the colonial non-white troops of the British empire, only Indians were allowed to fight in Europe.²⁹

Conceptions of race were important to the European imagination in the nineteenth century. Race was not exclusively associated with skin colour and remained a notoriously difficult concept to define. In the eighteenth century, racial difference had often been defined in terms of physical characteristics, environment, languages and behaviour, but by the 1850s