Introduction

Decolonizing the Soldier

How are soldiers made? Why do they fight? This book takes up these central questions of military history and sociology. It does so with the soldiers of a multicultural, imperial army who fought a great but obscure campaign against Japan on the forgotten fronts of British Asia during the Second World War. With few exceptions, inquiry into these questions has concerned the national armed forces of Western states. Wherever one stands in the debates over "combat motivation," the object of study is usually a national army, and most likely US, British, or German.[1] The nature, character, and course of these debates, which began in earnest during the Second World War, have been fundamentally shaped by the Western and national contexts of both the researchers and the armed forces they studied. Early explanations drew on organizational and social psychological theories and presupposed the nation-state. Later scholars looked to national society and culture, and to national racisms and ideologies, for new thinking.[2] The conceptual vocabulary and historical materials with which we think about soldiers and war are drawn nearly entirely from Western political modernity.[3]

In the terms of such Eurocentric military inquiry, the British Indian Army should hardly have functioned.[4] It was an ethnically diverse conglomeration in which few soldiers operated in their primary language.

[1] Key and representative texts include: Creveld, *Fighting Power*; Kellett, *Combat Motivation*; Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers*; King, *Combat Soldier*; Moran, *Anatomy of Courage*; Moskos, *American Enlisted Man*; Shils and Janowitz, "Cohesion and Disintegration"; Stouffer, *American Soldier*, 2 vols.

[2] Bartov, *Hitler's Army*; Cameron, *American Samurai*; Chodoff, "Ideology and Primary Groups"; Fritz, *Frontsoldaten*; Janowitz and Wesbrooke, *Political Education of Soldiers*; McPherson, *Cause and Comrades*.

[3] A point Chakrabarty made about the social sciences in general in *Provincializing Europe*, Chapter 1, pp. 27–46.

[4] For a general introduction and historical overview, see Mason, *Matter of Honour*.

It was divided and ruled down to the company level by the regional, religious, and caste distinctions of the Raj, and it was organized around Victorian ideas about martial races in ways that compromised combat efficiency. By the time of the Second World War, the British Indian Army had become a political and military contradiction confronting the colonized world's most advanced mass independence movement. Colonial control was its *raison d'être*, yet it commissioned nationalist Indian officers in increasing number. A late colonial army, it fought in a total contest of nations and ideologies, while suppressing a nationalist uprising in India. In the "race war" against Japan, it participated on the white man's side, under his command, in engagements as intense and replete with violation as those on any Pacific island battlefield.[5] On the eve of the globalization of the nation-state, the British Empire's cosmopolitan ranks evoked both the multiracial hosts of antiquity and the multinational peacekeeping and coalition forces of the times to come.

This book uses the Indian Army and other British and imperial forces in the Asia-Pacific Wars to rethink army–society relations. It develops a postcolonial perspective on how soldiers are created and come to participate in combat. Most writing about soldiers and battle, across a range of disciplines and genres, presumes the nation-state, or a serviceably equivalent polity, as the political container of relations between armed forces and society.[6] A key premise of this book, by contrast, is to take as ordinary an imperial context in approaching questions of politics, society and army, and their collective envelopment in war. Ordinary not only in the sense that the imperial, with its transnational hierarchies and multicultural formations, is more representative of historical experience than the nation-state.[7] But also because the imperial offers greater insight into the nature of the army as such.

Historically, soldiering in organized warfare exceeds the modern West and its national armies. Yet, the study of soldiers and armies

[5] Cf. Dower, *War Without Mercy*.
[6] See e.g. Huntington, *Soldier and the State*, p. 65: "There is no necessary reason why nation states should be the only socio-political groups maintaining professional forces. But with a few peripheral exceptions, this has been true. The military man consequently tends to assume that the nation state is the ultimate form of political organization."
[7] Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, Chapter 6.

has been profoundly shaped by the histories and sociologies of nation-states in Europe.[8] That is the field against which these subjects are generally imagined. Western experience constitutes the generic categories of inquiry, which then are applied to the histories and societies of others. The national and territorial state, mass society and ideology, democracy and citizenship, bureaucracy and atrocity, even the Greco-Roman origins of the West, underlie scholarly, as well as popular, imaginings of soldiers and wars.[9] Soldiering, an ancient and cosmopolitan vocation, is conceived in provincial terms. But what soldiers are and why they fight are not best understood in modern and national frames like "citizen soldiers." Such categories close off the ways in which soldiers, Western or otherwise, are other than their terms allow.

The problem is not that inquiry and theory based on Western historical experience are somehow intrinsically wrong or misguided. On the contrary, it is deeply insightful.[10] It is that provincial experience overwhelms the general categories and terms of analysis. A particular social and political context – the nation-state – is taken for granted, sets the terms. What happens when we proceed from alternate first premises? What general categories would we develop then?

British and imperial armed forces in the Second World War offer contrapuntal materials – between nation and empire – with which to begin.[11] Through comparative study of British, British Indian, and British imperial forces before and during the war against Japan, this book develops three lines of inquiry that collectively reformulate the terms of debate about armed forces, society and war with respect to infantry battle.

The first is a co-constitutive approach to army–society relations, which serves as both critique of the "army or society" thinking of

[8] See e.g. Black, *Rethinking Military History*; Bobbitt, *Shield of Achilles*; Bond, *War and Society in Europe 1870–1970*; Mann, *States, War and Capitalism*; Parker, *Military Revolution*; Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States*.

[9] See e.g. Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers*; Browning, *Ordinary Men*; Cohen, *Citizens and Soldiers*; Hanson, *Carnage and Culture*; Krebs, *Fighting for Rights*.

[10] Chakrabarty remarks: "The everyday experience of third-world social science is that *we* find these [Eurocentric] theories, in spite of their inherent ignorance of 'us,' eminently useful in understanding our societies." *Provincializing Europe*, p. 29. See also Burton, "On the Inadequacy and the Indispensability of the Nation"; Kaviraj, "The Imaginary Institution of India."

[11] Said, *Culture and Imperialism*.

conventional military sociology and a replacement for it. Military organizations transform social and cultural fields to create soldiers, and encounter frictions and resistances in doing so. Armed forces and society relate dynamically, shaping one another. The constitution of regular military forces has both general and historically particular dimensions; it is the local realization of general techniques. In this sense, national and colonial armies are instances of the same kind of process, rather than the latter being a derivative or imperfect instance of the former, as in narratives of the diffusion of the Western military to the periphery.[12]

That credible regular infantry soldiers can be constituted from diverse populations, in different times and places, speaks to the cosmopolitan character of the army and its disciplinary powers. Thinking about battle, about why soldiers fight, how hard they fight, whether they commit atrocity, and so on, should begin from an anthropological premise: these are general capacities realized in historically specific ways. Regular soldiering and combat are human potentials, not evidence of cultural or national essences, as much writing on armies imagines. Accordingly, the book's second line of inquiry conceives military discipline and the will to combat in terms of rituals, totems, and sacrifices, practices comparable across time and place. It develops a structural account of battle as a force that grabs and transforms participants on both sides, encouraging them to behave in comparable, even similar ways, whatever their national conceits.

These analytic possibilities are difficult to pursue in the traditionally Eurocentric study of Western armies, where soldiers appear as modern citizen-agents who make war and history in distinctive national ways. Battle is seen as a product of the contest of nations, manifesting the contestants' natures. By contrast, an implication of the first two lines of inquiry – co-constitution and anthropology – is that armed forces and war have powers to remake social contexts and their human bearers, even if they do not do so just as they please. Military discipline and battle activate and shape potentials for sacrifice, experienced through the lived categories of time and place. Battle, for soldiers, can generate energies for its own reproduction.

The third line of inquiry – theory – is to think through some of the consequences of the postcolonial perspective for the study of soldiers,

[12] See e.g. Ralston, *Importing the European Army*.

including national ones. Soldiers' actions and soldiers' accounts – reports, testimonies, memoirs – are foundational data for scholarly debate over the "face of battle" and the nature of military service. They are key also to efforts, public and private, to find meaning and purpose in wartime experience. Such accounts often focus on differences with enemies, as soldiers make sense of their experiences with the cultural materials they have to hand. An extraordinary racialization marks representations of the Asia-Pacific Wars, in everything from official documents to letters home. This becomes evidence for the role of specific national racisms in the making of savage battle, or gets caught up in debates over the relative significance of ideology and national military doctrine in the commission of atrocity.[13]

For this book, race hate is not the essential property of particular national groups, such as mid-twentieth century Germans or Japanese, or the US Marines. Britain's Indian and African colonial soldiers participated fully in intense, no-quarter engagements, as they did in other barbarous behavior that marked the Asia-Pacific Wars. How do they prompt us to think differently about racism and battlefield savagery? Battle played its own role in generating and shaping racial animus among participants. The experience of combat created a demand for an accounting, for reasons and motivations to be assigned to the violence. The categories of nation and race supplied ready meanings to make sense of battle, to represent and meaningfully construct it. An account of the relations between the experience of battle and its *ex post facto* representation is necessary before soldiers' writings can serve as evidence for their motivation.

The notion that soldiers fight and die for a cause is the red thread of legitimation that ties together state and nation. This is one reason why infantry and infantry battle lie at the heart of the idea of the state.[14] Relations between armed forces and society may appear at first a specialist matter for military sociology. But the connections between politics and force are fundamental even if neglected questions in social and political theory.[15] The idea of soldiers' service and sacrifice underwrites the nation-state as a sovereign territorial package of state,

[13] Cameron, *American Samurai*; Dower, *War Without Mercy*; Fritz, *Frontsoldaten*; Hull, *Absolute Destruction*; Rutherford, *Combat and Genocide*.
[14] Hanson, *Western Way of War*; McNeill, *Pursuit of Power*.
[15] Joas and Knöbl, *War in Social Thought*; Keane, *Reflections on Violence*.

army, and society. Colonial soldiers and imperial armies, however, relate differently to state-society-territory, and to the politics that interconnect them. They tell an alternate story about coercion and legitimacy, one where the value of military discipline – of the army in so far as it is the army – is that it can be relatively autonomous from politics, formally speaking. Colonial soldiers did not serve on the basis of national, democratic, or other political legitimation, but on that of the demands and rewards of their vocation. Their bayonets secured the "dominance without hegemony" that was empire.[16] What have been the consequences of allowing the nation, and other collective political identities, to frame and contain our understandings of the passions and energies of military service and battle?

Co-constitution, anthropology, and theory correspond to the three parts of the book. Part I, "Colonial Soldiers," is about army–society relations as historical process, looking first at the making of colonial soldiers out of colonial society in British India, and then at the ways in which the Second World War unmade the old imperial army. Part II, "Going to War," uses the rebuilding of British, Indian, and imperial forces and their employment on the Burma front to think about drill, ritual, and sacrifice in military organization and discipline. It approaches battle as a sphere of unforgiving constraints on agency but one that creates energies for its own reproduction. Part III, "History and Theory," turns to the consequences for inquiry of the interplay between local histories of soldiering and the common demands of military discipline and combat. What are the relations between the experience of battle and its representation in documents, memoirs, letters, and so on? How does the cosmopolitanism of the regular military make us look anew at Western military histories? What are the wider implications for thinking about politics, armed forces, and society?

In much military sociology and history, an unhelpful framework governs thinking about armed forces and society. They are conceived as distinct but isomorphic domains, existing prior to one another, and exercising independent causal force. Scholars take positions on what explains more of the variation in fighting spirit or combat behavior, army *or* society. Is it what happens to people after they join the military, or is it the cultures, identities, and ideologies recruits carry with

[16] Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony*.

them from civilian society into the military?[17] Armed forces and society are conceived as isomorphic in that state, army, and society come in a nation-state package, coeval with sovereign territory, with conjoined but distinct histories over time. The possibility that state, army, and society may vary spatially – that there are international and imperial aspects to the constitution of armed forces – is largely unattended, except in specialist scholarship directly concerned with colonial armies, so-called "private" military companies, and the like.[18]

The British Indian Army was only one, if perhaps the greatest and most long-lived, of the many indigenously recruited forces that secured and expanded the Western colonial order. Almost wherever the Europeans went they raised local forces in regular style, usually officered by a combination of Europeans and native sub-officers. Local soldiers were cheaper than European troops, less prone to disease, and, depending on their training and equipment, roughly as effective in small war campaigns. They were also a source of troops for imperial purposes outside of the democratic and other constraints of metropolitan politics. By the late nineteenth century, France and Britain had large standing colonial forces, which could be expanded for great power war.[19] The British Indian Army numbered half a million in the First World War and two million in the Second.[20] In the latter conflict, it fought from the China coast to Monte Cassino, sending divisions to East and North Africa, the Middle East, and Italy, while carrying the main burden of Britain's war against Japan in Malaya, Burma, and Northeast India.[21]

For colonial rulers, raising troops from among the colonized was a tricky business, one that often defined the rise and fall of empires.

[17] The debate marked out by Shils and Janowitz, "Cohesion and Disintegration," and Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, is representative. See also Lynn, *Battle*; *Bayonets of the Republic*; Moskos, *American Enlisted Man*. Despite this paradigmatic debate, sociologists have explored military-society relations in ways which reflect the constitutive approach taken here. See e.g. Boëne, "How 'Unique' should the Military Be?"; Dandeker, *Surveillance, Power, and Modernity*. In practice, many histories narrate complex amalgams of war, armed forces, and society. See e.g. Hull, *Absolute Destruction*; Merridale, *Ivan's War*; Neitzel and Welzer, *Soldaten*; Sherry, *Rise of American Air Power*.

[18] Barkawi, "State and Armed Force in International Context."

[19] For overviews, see Killingray and Omissi, *Guardians of Empire*; Kiernan, *Colonial Empires and Armies*.

[20] Perry, *Commonwealth Armies*, p. 116; Omissi, *Indian Voices*, p. 4.

[21] Roy, *Indian Army in Two World Wars*.

Colonialism was an outside force dependent upon the sword. This situation necessitated curiously explicit arrangements between army and society, between military organization and local culture, and between soldier and polity. Colonial soldiers were not simply mustered from colonial society but rather made through elaborate processes of selection, recruitment, and training, in ways that transformed culture and society. For the Sikhs, one of the principal martial races of the Raj, military service determined who they were as a peasantry and a people.

Colonial power could organize society for military purposes, even modularly rearrange it, but the way in which this was done had consequences, as Chapter 1, "Making Colonial Soldiers," shows. Once the British Indian Army was organized around the idea of the martial races, its myths and stereotypes took on organizational reality for all concerned. Officers had to make the system work and soldiers had to play their parts. The cultural field with which the British organized the army also could be used by disgruntled soldiers and outside activists to organize resistance, or for more mundane purposes of negotiating conditions of service. An upshot is that conventional military sociology's distinction between army and society loses purchase on army–society relations: the two spheres were not separate but constitutively related.

By the time of the Second World War, the ethnic structure of the Indian Army had become too elaborate to be sustained in a major conflict of long duration, much less one fought on two fronts. With its first line formations sent early in the war to fight Italians and Germans in Africa, its war-raised battalions were run over in 1941–42 by the Japanese juggernaut from Hong Kong to Rangoon, via Singapore. From the remnants of this defeated army, the Japanese recruited an anti-British Indian National Army (INA), which, along with the Imperial Japanese Army, threatened India itself. To rise to this challenge, British, Indian, and imperial forces on the Burma front had to be rebuilt as a fighting army under a fighting general, William Slim.[22]

The pressures of operations and defeats and its massive expansion during the war transformed the army. It was forced to commission ever greater numbers of Indians as officers. Recruitment of other ranks reached beyond the favored "martial classes," as they were termed by World War II. In the field, officers bent and then broke the rigid ethnic rules around which the army was organized, in small and large ways.

[22] Marston, *Phoenix from the Ashes*.

The right rations, the right type of recruit, the officer knowledgeable in this or that language or religion, were not always available. In unsettling the Raj's reifications, war served as a great denaturalizing force for Indians and British alike.

The cycle of defeat and remaking had put into motion relations between armed forces, society, and war, and this is the subject of Chapter 2, "Unmaking an Imperial Army." Colonial knowledge, the official orientalism so evident in the ethnic structuring of the army, was less relevant to managing the army at war. In large measure, Indian soldiers went out to fight the Japanese led by a combination of emergency-commissioned nationalists (that is, the new Indian officers) and British officers who were new to India and only recently schoolboys. The martial races handbooks were discarded under the demands of campaigning and fighting. Perhaps more surprising, and revealing of battle's brute nature, is that soldiers did not even require much of a common language to fight effectively together.

Colonial soldiers reverse the political logic that governs much scholarly and popular thinking about armed forces. There, political agents – citizens, national subjects – make war. By contrast, war made many Indian soldiers into political agents, especially those who found themselves in Axis captivity. Among other things, the army had taught them to read and then found it necessary to provide them with propaganda. Instead of providing a foundation for military service, the relations between wartime soldiering and politics were fluid and multivalent in colonial context. This is the topic of Chapter 3, "Politics and Prisoners in the Indian Army," the final chapter of Part I.

By 1943, Indian soldiers found their former comrades arrayed against them in the INA. The British had failed even to promise any concrete steps toward independence for India after the war and famine was consuming millions in Bengal, while ethnic and nationalist strife seethed across the Raj. Despite all this, Indian soldiers did go out to fight, increasingly effectively as the war went on. Along with their African and British co-belligerents, they found themselves engaged in an unforgiving infantry war, entangled in Burma's formidable terrain. Combat's exit valve of surrender was shut tight by merciless antagonism, racially expressed. Yet, political modernity's explanatory armory for such battle has little interpretive utility for British imperial forces. No particular racial ideology united Indian and other colonial soldiers; they themselves were brown and black people. Prior to the war, most

of them were uneducated peasants, not enfranchised citizens steeped in national traditions and enmities. They served a distant King-Emperor, not a homeland with their own people, and they fought an enemy who promised them liberation from white colonialism. Indian and imperial soldiers did not compile a combat record anything like that of the *Waffen SS* or the US Marines, but their ability to stand up to and then defeat the Japanese army raises questions about the sources of military obedience and fighting spirit. If not some combination of nationalism, ideology, and racism, what sustains soldiers' resolve beyond effective military training and leadership? Setting aside elite forces, and the extremes of variation between mutiny and high *esprit de corps*, what accounts for even a basic level of combat discipline, much less when fighting someone else's war?

It is in response to these questions that Part II, "Going to War," looks at discipline, training, and the fighting in Burma, and at how these operated upon those involved. The army is a machine for group formation. Under the right conditions, battle assists it by generating solidarity and the will to sacrifice among soldiers. Regular military discipline consists of a set of sturdy and robust ritual techniques, many of which double as training, easily adapted to diverse contexts and cultures. These techniques work more or less anywhere, but are always realized locally, articulated with a particular social, cultural, and political character. Soldiers express themselves in a local idiom, but one organizationally transformed by military life. Militarized masculinity and misogyny, for example, can be tailored to fit native custom and still play a key role in bonding together soldiers. Taken together, the ritual dimensions of military life are myriad, pervasive, and profoundly consequential, especially for the instantiation of solidarity, hierarchy, and authority.[23]

A basic presupposition of the debate over combat motivation, across a range of perspectives, is that casualties corrode and ultimately destroy group solidarity and fighting spirit. For Edward Shils and Morris Janowitz, in military sociology's foundational paper, primary groups break down when casualties and other losses are such that the unit can no longer meet the material or psychological needs of its members.[24] In a devastating riposte, Omer Bartov observed that, in conditions of

[23] Ben-Ari, *Mastering Soldiers*; King, "The Word of Command"; McNeill, *Keeping Together in Time*.
[24] Shils and Janowitz, "Cohesion and Disintegration," p. 281.