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Imperialism and the Making of Armies

Barkawi, Tarak. *Soldiers of Empire: Indian and British Armies in World War II*, 2017, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 321 pp., 24.99$ (p/b). Available as hardback, paperback, and e-book.

In *Soldiers of Empire*, Tarak Barkawi gives equal weighting to each part of the title. This book is first and foremost about 'soldiers': how soldiers are made through combat, society, and the army as an institution. It engages also with soldiers 'of' empire: how colonial subjects, with varied, ambivalent, and sometimes outright hostile attitudes toward the British Empire engaged with the Indian Army, fighting on behalf of empire within and through colonial structures. Finally, this book is about 'empire': how racial, orientalist categories are marshalled in the understanding of war, both by its participants and by historians, perpetuating imperialist tropes and concepts in the understanding of war. Through these multiple, integrated foci, Barkawi challenges understandings of soldiers and armies in all contexts, demonstrates the colonial underpinnings of military historiography (and their incorporation in contemporary scholarship), and establishes the central role of empire in shaping the military forces of both the past and today. As such, this book should be essential reading for scholars of military history, (critical) war studies, and global and postcolonial International Relations at all levels.

Barkawi is clear throughout the book that his aim transcends the narrow confines of the history of a colonial army; on the contrary, "the colonial situation tells us something about how armies work in general (82)." Rejecting the notion of nationally-defined characters and determined ways of fighting, he argues that there exist significant commonalities in the training and attitudes of soldiers throughout the world, including across colonial and Western forces. More than national origin, it is engagement in battle that determines the constitution of soldiers. The activity of "Fighting has its own structure" (11), through which soldiers and war are co-

constituted by structural constraints (193). In this way, therefore, the fighting that occurred on the Asian front (e.g., in Myanmar, Singapore, etc.) was not dissimilar to the experience of war on the European front; for Barkawi, war has a single "cosmopolitan character" that conditions "the experience of war" (124). Barkawi underscores this point with comparisons between European tactics – notably, the frontal infantry charges of World War I – and operations by the British Indian Army, suggesting a higher degree of similitude than is generally acknowledged.

Although "Battle makes common demands, and generates similar responses, among those who participate in it" (256), one crucial difference between European armies and the British Indian Army lies in the structuring presence of colonial power relations. Barkawi begins with a paradox: according to Eurocentric models of army structure, emphasising nationalist ideology and shared belonging to a single ethnic and linguistic unit, "the British Indian Army should hardly have functioned (1)." Given that the British Indian Army was, in fact, an effective fighting force (at least after 1942), Barkawi reverses the question: why did it succeed despite its lack of common identity and language? *Soldiers of Empire* argues that the British Indian Army was explicitly constructed through colonial categories, through "an ethnic field of relations" (19). The key relations structuring the army were not those between military units, but rather those between the army and the society, notably society's economic dependence (89-93) on the colonial army and the creation of "official ethnic identities" (21), martial classes, and religious-ethnic designations through the army, which were subsequently reified and naturalized. Barkawi subsequently traces the transformation of these categories, from a system relying on shared origins – soldiers within a unit recruited in a single regional, socioeconomic, and ethnic background – to a wartime system of shared ritualistic belonging. In his words, "rituals produce groups" (161), and in wartime, the troops overcame an absence of shared origins by rallying around unit-specific "totems", insignias, respected commanders, and shared experiences (185). In Barkawi's account, therefore, there is a clear distinction

between the peacetime British Indian Army – in which colonially-defined ethnic categories and relations played a significant role – and the wartime army, in which the emphasis on shared battle experiences downplayed a number of colonial tensions, not least the question of Indian independence.

The final section of Barkawi's book deals specifically with the relevance of imperial armies in international and military historiography. Whereas colonialism plays a relatively subdued role in conditioning the method of fighting in Barkawi's account, imperialism did play a significant role in shaping historical discourse. Barkawi uses two prominent examples to illustrate this point. The first is the common perception of Japanese soldiers fighting in a fanatic manner. Barkawi notes that the "Banzai" charge is little more than a reasonable infantry tactic – moving forward rapidly under the cover of suppressing fire (207) – which, in addition to being similar to the frontal assaults of World War I, is described as rational and brave when employed by British forces (260). The second example is that of the perception of Japanese barbarity. The spiral of violence and mistreatment of enemy combatants is attributable to reciprocal actions, with mutual perceptions of barbarity being taken to justify the murder of prisoners and, conversely, the tendency to fight to the death (213). Relying on participants' accounts as the ground for historiography, therefore, risks perpetuating the racial hatred born out of fighting (234-238).

Finally, Barkawi highlights the legacy of imperialism in conditioning contemporary armies. Independent India's army built on the foundations of the British Indian Army (105). Barkawi generalizes this, arguing that "Armies may appear to be the principal national – even nationalist – institution, but their histories are very often imperial and global in one way or another" (280). It may be felt with good reason that Barkawi's history of the Indian Army does not quite provide a comprehensive foundation to this wider argument about military anthropology (4). Nevertheless, *Soldiers of Empire* does well to point to essential further

research on the making of contemporary armies, military cultures and doctrines, and the profound historical legacies of the "arraying [of] brown and black men in disciplined order to kill and violently repress other brown and black people [which] was and remains central to the making of the modern world" (281).