

The stories of Muslim soldiers on the Western Front; WWI

When Britain declared war on Germany in 1914, there were only 155,000 personnel in the British Indian Army. By the end of World War I more than 1,300,000 soldiers had volunteered for service. The largest ethnic class to serve Britain were the Punjabi Mussalmans. The majority of these men had come from the cities of Rawalpindi, Jhelum, Attock, Lahore and Rohtak. In addition to the Punjabi contribution there were large numbers of sepoys recruited from the North West Frontier Province. Pashtuns from Peshawar, Kohat, Waziristan and Nowshera had all played a pivotal role in the defence of the British realm.

From 1914 to 1915, 138,000 Indian soldiers were involved on the Western Front; in Europe. With mounting casualties, Indians were despatched to Europe to plug holes in the crumbling Allied line. The conditions of trench warfare are best described by the experiences of one Pashtun soldier.

'The fighting is going on with great violence. When our army attacks 600 guns fire for 35 minutes...The very earth shakes. Then our men advance. Just like a turnip is cut into pieces, so a man is blown to bits by the explosion of a shell. In some places our trenches are only 200 yards from the enemy's, in others, 100. Day and night there is a rain of shells. No account is taken of the dead. There are heaps of them in the trenches. All those who came with me have all ceased to exist...it is like the destruction of the world.'

Despite the horrific conditions on the Western Front, Indians did not deter from achieving recommendations for bravery. The first medal awarded to an Indian during World War I went to a young Afridi Pashtun by the name of Usman Khan.

'Usman Khan was wounded twice during the night and was ordered back to the regimental Aid Post.... He refused to go...in his opinion, his wounds were slight and he could fire his rifle perfectly well as long as he remained in the lying position. He was once again wounded; rather more seriously now, for a bullet removed a sizeable portion of both his thighs, causing serious bleeding. This time he was not given the choice and was dragged off the field, protesting feebly that he could still fire his rifle. He was subsequently awarded the Indian Distinguished Service Medal.'

Several weeks later Khudadad Khan a Punjabi sepoy was awarded India's first ever Victoria Cross (the highest military decoration for valour) for his heroism against the Kaiser's army on the Western Front. 'Sepoy Khudadad, although himself wounded, remained working his gun until all the other five men of his detachment had been killed. He later escaped to rejoin his company.'

The following year another Muslim soldier became the recipient of the Victoria Cross. At Weiltje near Ypres on the 26th of April 1915, Mir Dast rallied his men during a German gas attack; he carried eight British and Indian officers to safety under heavy machine gun fire. Badly affected by gas, he returned to the Frontier region in 1916, and was discharged to a pension.

By Armistice Day 1918, more than 400,000 Muslims had enlisted, Muslims, Sikhs, Gurkhas and Hindus had all witnessed the horrors of trench warfare on the Western Front as well as the 'bloody' campaigns for Mesopotamia and Africa. In total approximately 60,000 men perished, 13,000 medals and 12 Victoria Crosses were awarded to Indians for valour and courage.

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Pashtun/Persian and Rajput heritage and a direct descendent of Mahabat Khan the legendary general and statesman who served the Mughal Emperor Jahangir. In the earlier part of the 19th century members of Jahan's family were specifically hired to assist the army of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in conquering the Punjab. After the death of the Maharaja and subsequent annexation of the Punjab, several of his family members enlisted to fight in the British Indian Army.

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