

Better Together and Compelling Comparisons

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World War One was the first truly global war and the first time that soldiers of completely different races were fighting on the same side. The British were concerned with this increased racial mixing as they feared that it would degrade British society and weaken the British Empire. One way that the British addressed this was through the prevention of inter-racial relationships by controlling the sexualities of Indian men, that is denying them sexual relations with British women, and restricting their access to British society. This essay will discuss two sources regarding Indian soldiers in World War One. The first is a journal article by Phillipa Levine titled “Battle Colours,” which discussed how the sexualities of Indian men were controlled and how they were denied citizenship because of British fears around inter-racial relationships and venereal disease. The second is a textbook by Ian Beckett titled “The Great War,” which offered a political and military history of the war, with one section focused on the mobilization and motivation of colonial troops in India. The textbook complements Levine’s article as it provides a background to Indian involvement and explains why the discrimination discussed in this article, occurred. This essay will argue that these sources are complementary and that Levine’s article is convincing because of her compelling comparisons.

Both Levine's article and Beckett’s textbook discuss a similar subject matter, the history of World War One and Indian soldiers. However, they have different arguments. The journal article argued that by controlling the sexuality of Indian men, the British maintained control over their empire and denied Indian men citizenship. This is argued in two ways. The first way this was argued was to analyze the language used to describe Indian men. Some of this language included arguing that Indian men had “savage ferocity and low intelligence.”¹ By referring to them in this way the British were able to degrade, dehumanize and deny them access to

¹ Phillipa Levine, “Battle Colors: Race, Sex, and Colonial Soldiery in World War I,” *Journal of Women’s History* 9, no. 4 (1998): 106, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2010.0213>.

citizenship. The second way that this was argued was through her description of the segregation they faced. Indian soldiers were held in lodgings away from the rest of the population and were carefully watched to ensure that inter-racial relationships or mixing did not occur.² This physical segregation is instrumental in Levine's argument that the British were maintaining control, as they could determine who was fit to access British society. These two arguments demonstrate the attitudes towards Indian men and the treatment of them. By talking poorly and treating them poorly they could view the Indians as lesser than, and thus justify their occupation of India.

The textbook makes two arguments regarding the motivation and support of Indian soldiers. The first is that the Indians believed, as Gandhi states, that the "gateway to our freedom is situated on French soil."³ They believed that through fighting alongside Britain, they would be able to develop a stronger sense of nationalism and gain more economic independence.⁴ The second argument made is that the Indian army had a lack of support from the British army once on the front lines. There was a shortage of white officers to lead them, and inadequate reinforcements to replace them, resulting in high casualties and mission failures.⁵ This demonstrates a lack of support given to the Indian soldiers, support that was typically given to the British soldiers. These two aspects speak to the Indian motivation for fighting and the inferior treatment they received from Britain.

In addition to having different scopes and arguments, these sources also use different types of evidence. Levine takes a narrow approach to research, focusing on a small number of people and a specific aspect of their lives, the sexuality of Indian soldiers in World War One. She focuses on social history, discussing interactions between individuals. Levine relies heavily on

² Levine, "Battle Colors," 105.

³ Ian Beckett, *The Great War* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 90.

⁴ Beckett, *The Great War*, 90.

⁵ Beckett, *The Great War*, 94.

three sources; reports written by a censor who recorded information from letters written by Indian soldiers, statistics on venereal disease, and articles from newspapers. These sources are useful in determining the opinions and actions of individuals, but less helpful in determining the events surrounding these opinions. The textbook focuses more on political and military history as it discusses the leaders at the time and the actions that they took, with little regard to individual soldiers or their interactions. The main sources of the textbook include political speeches, statements and correspondence. This is useful in determining the political actions at this time but less helpful in determining the mood of the population. While both of these sources discuss the role of India in the British war effort, their different approaches to history mean that they have different scopes and arguments.

Levine makes a compelling argument in her article, arguing that Britain aimed to control their society and empire by limiting Indian access to British society and denying citizenship. Levine's article is compelling as it uses good sources and reasoning, but its largest unique strength is the power of its comparisons. Comparisons are compelling in this article in particular because it addresses the differences in treatment between those who the British considered citizens, primarily white men, and those who were not, women and non-white men including Indians. The first comparison that Levine makes is the comparison between Indian and white colonial soldiers when on leave in Britain. When white soldiers were on leave they were able to roam London and have relationships with the local women.⁶ This freedom is then contrasted with the segregation and close watch that the Indian soldiers faced.⁷ This demonstrates the difference in access to society that the white citizens experienced, versus the control experienced by Indian non-citizens. The second comparison that Levine makes is the comparison between the treatment

⁶ Levine, "Battle Colors," 105.

⁷ Levine, "Battle Colors," 107.

of Indian men in Britain and white colonial soldiers in Cairo, Egypt. The white soldiers in Cairo were able to visit the brothel district, where many contracted venereal disease.⁸ These men were publicly marched through the brothel district in daylight so they could see the women, in an effort to produce shame among the men, but were not formally punished.⁹ In comparison, Indian soldiers, when in Britain, were preemptively punished, through physical segregation preventing them from having relationships with British women.¹⁰ This demonstrates a difference in treatment between the white soldiers, who were considered citizens and thus given freedom, and the Indian soldiers who were treated with fear and denied freedom. Both of these examples outline the difference in treatments between men with citizenship, and men without.

The evidence used in both the journal article and textbook are both convincing and well researched, but they focused on different aspects of history during World War One. The journal article focuses on the personal lives of a group of people, looking at their views, opinions and personal relationships. The textbook provides an official account of history, focusing mainly on military manoeuvres, official correspondence and speeches. These sources are different, both in their arguments and sources, but are complementary. The journal provides an in-depth understanding of this issue, while the textbook provides the necessary background information to understand the circumstances leading up to Indian soldiers in Britain. Levine's article is convincing, as it outlines how Indian men were targeted to deny them freedom, bodily control, and citizenship. While Levine's article is strong, supported by Beckett's textbook which is written from a different historical angle, the issues surrounding Indian soldiers in Britain can be fully understood.

⁸Levine, "Battle Colors," 107.

⁹ Levine, "Battle Colors," 107.

¹⁰ Levine, "Battle Colors," 107.

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