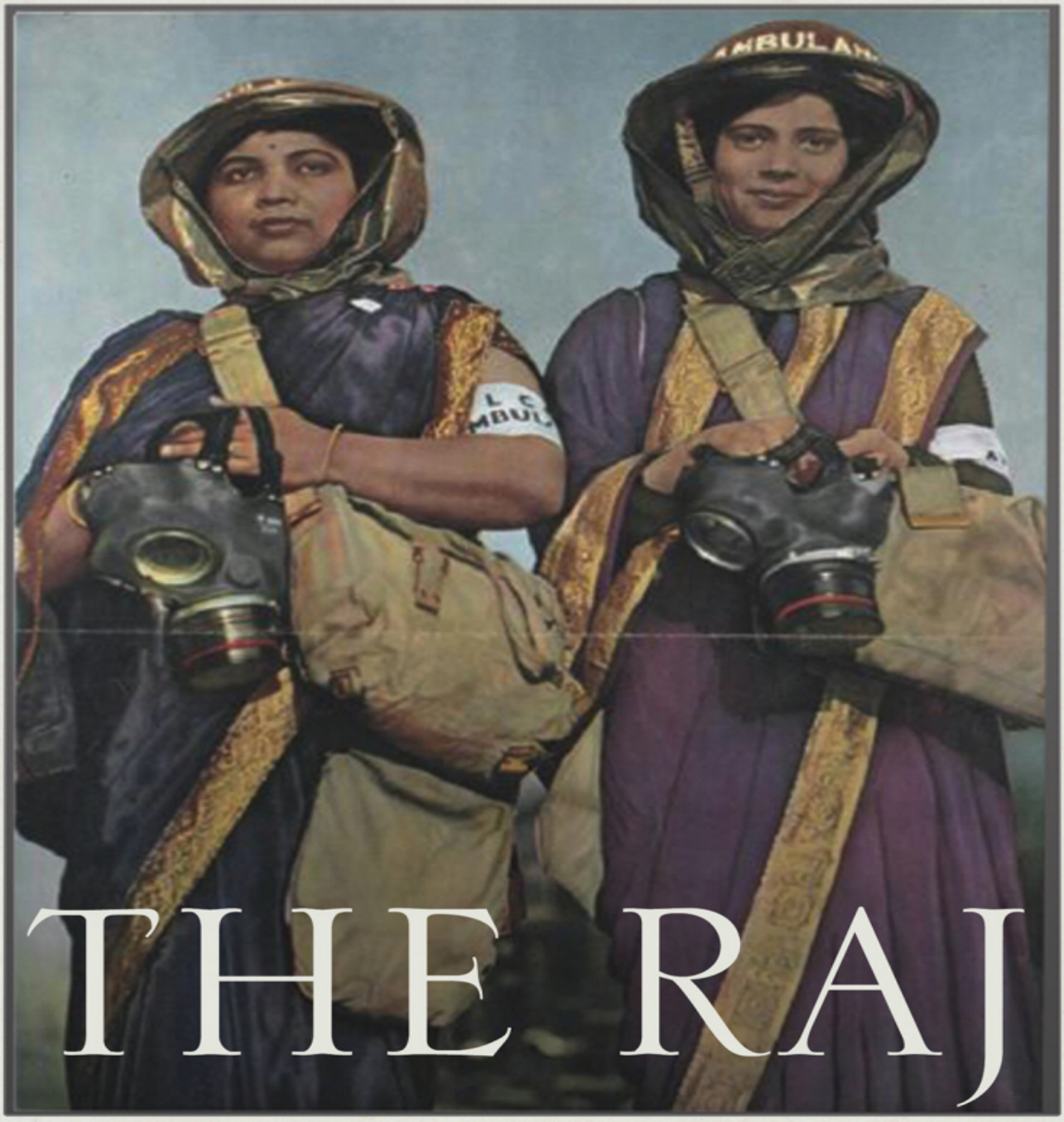
YASMIN KHAN



THE RAJ AT WAR

A People's History of India's Second World War

Contents

About the Book

The Second World War was not fought by Britain alone. India produced the largest volunteer army in world history: over 2 million men. But, until now, there has never been a comprehensive account of India's turbulent home front and the nexus between warfare and India's society.

At the heart of *The Raj at War* are the many lives and voices of ordinary Indian people. From the first Indian to win the Victoria Cross in the war to the three soldiers imprisoned as 'traitors to the Raj' who returned to a hero's welcome, from the nurses in Indian General Hospitals to the labourers, prostitutes and families – their testimonies reveal the great upheaval experienced throughout the land.

Yasmin Khan presents the hidden and sometimes overlooked history of India at war, and shows how mobilisation for the war introduced seismic processes of economic, cultural and social change – decisively shaping the international war effort, the unravelling of the empire and India's own political and economic trajectory.

About the Author

Yasmin Khan is a British writer and historian. She is an Associate Professor of History at the University of Oxford and a Fellow of Kellogg College.

Her first book, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*, won the Gladstone Prize from the Royal Historical Society in 2007 and was longlisted for the Orwell Prize in 2008.

List of Illustrations

Sir Stafford Cripps with Gandhi in Delhi © Imperial War Museums
Aruna Asaf Ali © RIA Novosti/Alamy
‘What About India?’ poster © Alamy
The Quit India movement, August 1942, courtesy of GandhiServe Foundation
Policewomen from the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force © Imperial War Museums
An aircraft plotter of the WAC (I), courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration
Clearing land for airfields, courtesy of NARA
An American airfield in India, courtesy of NARA
The Bengal famine of 1943 © William Vandivert/The LIFE Picture Collection/Getty Images
A family during the Bengal famine © Keystone/Getty Images
A free kitchen in Calcutta, 1943 © Keystone/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

Chronology of Major Events

1939

1 September	Government of India Act centralises executive authority
3 September	War declared
3 September	Recruiting stations in India opening; internment of Italians and Germans starts
3 November	United Provinces and Bombay Congress ministries resign, followed by ministries in Orissa, Central Provinces and NWFP

1940

13 March	Udham Singh assassinates Michael O'Dwyer in London
22–4 March	All India Muslim League meeting declares Lahore Resolution
10 May	Churchill becomes Prime Minister in Britain
3 July	Subhas Chandra Bose imprisoned (until 5 December 1940)
8 August	'The August Offer' presented in a White Paper (rejected by Muslim League and Congress)
18 September	Sinking of the SS *City of Benares*
17 October	Gandhi authorises individual *satyagraha* followed by 20,000 arrests
25 October	Eastern Supply Group meets in Delhi to discuss war supplies

1941

January	Indian language broadcast service started for Indian troops in Middle East
January	Subhas Chandra Bose escapes India overland for Germany
February–April	East African campaigns, e.g. battle of Keren
April	India celebrates Allied North and East African victories
22 June	Operation Barbarossa begins; Hitler invades Russia
7 August	Rabindranath Tagore dies
November	First Victoria Crosses awarded to Indians during the war
7 December	Japanese attack Pearl Harbor, American entry into war

1942

15 February	Singapore falls to the Japanese, first INA being formed American troops arriving in Calcutta
19 February	Subhas Chandra Bose makes first open broadcast to India
27 February	Japanese aircraft raid Port Blair in Andaman and Nicobar
6 April	Vizagapatam and Cocanada bombed
14 April	False alarm in Madras, city evacuated
7–8 March	Rangoon falls; flow of refugees from Burma increasing
23 March	Cripps arrives in India
29 March	Burma Road cut by Japanese
5–6 April	Bombing raids on Ceylon
April	Formation of Women's Auxiliary Corps (India)
10, 16 May	Bombing raids on Imphal
May	Allies withdraw from Burma
June	Grady technical mission in India from USA
July	First battle of El Alamein
14 July	Congress Working Committee meets at Wardha
July	Communist Party of India legalised
8 August	All India Congress Committee adopts Quit India resolution
9 August	Gandhi and Congress leaders arrested
August	Quit India movement breaks out across the country: at least 2,500 deaths and 60,000–90,000 arrests
October	Second battle of El Alamein Cyclone hits Midnapore
13 December	Chittagong bombed
17 December	British forces occupy parts of Arakan region in Burma
20–8 December	Air raids on Calcutta
December	Building of the Ledo Road initiated

1943

10 February	Gandhi fasts for ten days and risks death African troops start to arrive in India
7 March	Japanese counter-offensive at Arakan Scale of famine in Bengal becomes apparent
9 May	Evacuation of Maugdaw in Arakan region of Burma
21 May	Public holiday to celebrate victory in North Africa
19 June	Announcement of Wavell's appointment as Viceroy and Auchinleck's as Commander-in-Chief, India

21 June	Bose’s first speech from Tokyo broadcast
2 July	Bose lands in Singapore in a Japanese aircraft
25 August	Announcement of Mountbatten’s appointment as Supreme Allied Commander, South-East Asia
December	43,600 US troops arrive in India
5 December	Renewed bombing of docks in Calcutta

1944

March	Battle of Imphal, Burma
4 April	Japanese attack Kohima, Burma; battle lasts until June
14 April	Major ammunition dock explosion in Bombay
6 May	Gandhi released from detention
6 June	Allied invasion of Normandy begins
24 June	Appointment of Indian Famine Inquiry announced
3 August	Myitkyina in Burma in Allied hands
23 August	Paris liberated
August	VD levels in Calcutta peak 376/1,000

1945

9 May	End of war with Germany Bengal Famine Inquiry Report published
15 June	Nehru and Congress Working Committee released
25 June	Simla Conference opens in Simla, India
6 August	First atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima
14 August	War ends with Japan
September	Liberation of Japanese prisoners of war
7 October	Allied British force reoccupies Andaman and Nicobar
5 November	First trials of members of the Indian National Army, Delhi

1946

3 January	Sentences passed on three Indian National Army officers
18 February	Royal Indian Naval Mutiny in Bombay

1947

14–15 August	Partition and Independence: Indian and Pakistani Independence from British colonial rule

The Raj at War

A People's History of India's Second World War

Yasmin Khan

THE BODLEY HEAD
LONDON

‘You want to know the names of the men who have joined the army from our village. They are too many to be mentioned.’

An Urdu letter from an unknown man in the North-West Frontier Province to his son, 1943.

‘And war is many things.’

Richard Flanagan, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*

Prologue

On 3 January 1946, three men, Prem Kumar Sahgal, Gurbaksh Singh Dhillon and Shah Nawaz Khan, quietly emerged from imprisonment in Old Delhi's Red Fort. The Government of India had held them there for three months. Just four days earlier the trio had been convicted of waging war against the King-Emperor and sentenced to transportation for life. They were leading officers of the Indian National Army (INA) and had been in the vanguard of Subhas Chandra Bose's renegade force. They had fought for the Axis in Burma and South-East Asia. Now they were free men and, within days, found themselves national heroes. The Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army had remitted their sentences; although technically found guilty, their punishment had been quashed. People interpreted their release as a decisive victory against the British Raj.

The trials had been a disaster for the British rulers. The bungled attempt at a public prosecution had resulted in the 'hero worship of traitors' in the words of Archibald Wavell, the Viceroy of India in 1946. He admitted frankly that the affair was 'embarrassing'.[1] Since November, the trial had gripped the imagination of the Indian public. People had bought reports of the court case, autobiographies of the officers, panegyrics of Bose and pamphlets about all aspects of the Indian National Army, on sale at every pavement stall and bookshop. The way in which Bose and his followers had established a breakaway army to side with the Japanese had been told in full for the first time, without the full force of wartime censorship in place.

As the word spread of the men's release they were swept along the cramped streets of Old Delhi in a growing tide of supporters, cheered and hoisted on shoulders. Soon they were forced to stand on the roof of a car because of the crush of the crowds. Everybody clamoured to shake their hands and to fill their mouths with sweets. Indian National Congress politicians rushed to the scene to be among the first to congratulate them. Over the coming days, the men paraded around Delhi, Lahore and across the country. They were hosted at massive rallies. Everywhere they went admirers mobbed them, thrust forward autograph books and strung heavy garlands of flowers around their necks. The crowds were hundreds of thousands strong. 'People wanted to see us, touch us, hear us speak and garland us. They had gone mad with the joy of our release. Young girls cut their fingers with razor blades and applied blood to our foreheads instead of vermillion', recalled Gurbaksh Singh Dhillon, one of the released prisoners.[2] Policemen, magistrates and officials looked on, powerless to intervene or to stem the tide.

The Red Fort, the sandstone fortress built by the Mughal emperors in the heart of New Delhi, was spectacularly ill-chosen as the location for the trial. The fort, which had been used as a barracks by the Indian Army ever since the uprising of 1857, was the symbolic seat of South Asian power. So, too, the British decision to try the three officers together, a Sikh, a Hindu and a Muslim. This just added piquancy to the symbolism of the event. The Congress Party used the trials as a way to try to build pan-religious solidarity and some of the finest legal minds in the country, including Jawaharlal Nehru, the foremost Congressman of the era, had represented the men as their defence barristers. Any earlier ambivalence the Congressmen had felt about the militarism and unabashed pro-Axis stance of the INA was swept aside in the fervour of the moment.

The vehement outpourings of anger that greeted the INA trials, and widespread rejoicing at the release of the prosecuted men, were the result of a hardened form of nationalism. Everywhere there was a new belief in the power of violence to release India from colonial control, and an upsurge of post-war euphoria which gripped civilians and soldiers alike. Policemen, magistrates and military generals became reluctant to intervene in a cause célèbre which had captured the imagination of people of all regional and religious backgrounds. Military commanders of the Indian Army had feared mutiny if the INA men received the death sentence. As it was, over 20,000 members of the Royal Indian Navy would mutiny during the coming weeks in any case.

The upsurge of political zeal was inextricably linked with ongoing demobilisation. As over 2 million Indian soldiers were demobilised from the Indian Army in the aftermath of the war, and began to return to their villages, they started to ask how they would be rewarded for their sacrifices during the war. As one Pathan soldier told the Indian civil servant Malcolm Darling, ‘We suffered in the war but you didn’t … we bore with this so that we might be free.’[3] This was the moment that British rule in India became untenable. It marked a decisive break with everything that had gone before. Imperial rule had lost its final shreds of legitimacy. The Raj had unravelled under the pressure of war.

The elation greeting the released prisoners would have been unthinkable in 1939. At the start of the war, nobody would have anticipated in Mahatma Gandhi’s India that it would be military men who would soon be in the vanguard of nationalism. But six years of war had changed the political language. By 1946 Gandhi was barely heeded by a new generation of protesters who were angry, strident and determined to achieve Independence. Their hero was

Subhas Chandra Bose and their battle cry was ‘Blood is calling to blood’.

By contrast, in August 1939 as the world waited for the news of the outbreak of war, a government spokesman in Simla, the summer capital of imperial India, declared, ‘We only have to press a button and the whole organisation prepared to meet a war emergency will slide smoothly into action.’[4] This was propaganda, of course, but it also suggests the easy complacency with which India was plunged into war in 1939.

At the start of the war, Europe’s troubles had seemed far-distant and removed from India. Living in the cantonments and bungalows of the imperial state, the older guard of army officers and officials believed that India could be insulated and protected from the swirl of ideologies taking place in Europe. The war would be framed in terms of loyalty and disloyalty to the Crown and would be a repeat performance of India’s role in the First World War: the landed and the wealthy would take the lead and Indian subjects would fall in step behind them. India would come to the aid of the motherland, and the state would draw on manpower and resources as it saw fit. The prospect of total war, of a threat of invasion reaching India’s borders, of deeply transformative social change, of the erosion and eventual collapse of the power of the imperial state, would have seemed outlandish to many of these officers in the late 1930s.

* * *

Some years ago, I wrote a book about the Partition of India, about the tragic violence, refugee movements and the breakdown of trust, which resulted in the making of the two new nations of India and Pakistan. That book focused on the pivotal year of 1947. But in the course of writing it I was often struck by how profoundly transformed India had been

in the 1940s, and, in particular, how the Second World War had determined so many aspects of decolonisation and Partition. Muhamad Ali Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League, had made his very first public demand for Pakistan within months of the war starting. I realised that it is necessary to dig back into the preceding years, and to understand the whole wartime transformation of India in order to really comprehend the exit velocity of the British, the crisis that accompanied Independence in 1947 and the Partition of the subcontinent. Once I began to trawl back into the 1940s, I realised just how critical these years had been to the collapse of the empire and to the making of modern South Asia.

In Britain, in recent years the sheer scale of the contribution of the British Empire to the war effort, in both the First and Second World Wars, has become apparent. No longer is it simply an island story of heroic, plucky Britain fighting against Nazi-occupied continental Europe; it has now become increasingly customary for historians to refer to the contribution played by Asian, African and Caribbean servicemen in the 1940s. This is only fitting. Some 5 million joined the military services of the British Empire during the Second World War, almost half of them from South Asia. It was only in 2002 that the Commonwealth Gates Trust installed a memorial on Constitution Hill in London to honour the role of these men. Museum exhibitions, oral history projects and television documentaries have continually probed and elucidated the role of imperial and Commonwealth servicemen and their lesser-known participation in the war, to reveal how crucial they often were to the action, the sacrifices that they made in the face of terrible odds, and also to divulge individual stories of great bravery and intrepid action.

It is no longer true to suggest that this is an entirely forgotten story. From the life histories of Sikh pilots in the Royal Air Force to the memoirs of Caribbean seamen on

board merchant vessels in the Atlantic, we now know more than ever before about the global mobilisation and deployment of men from across the empire. At El Alamein, Monte Cassino and Kohima, ‘British’ victories belonged to an extraordinarily diverse and international cast of men from the continents of Australasia, Africa, North America and Asia. These kinds of memorialisation have had an echo in India, with regimental museums and military historians speaking more vocally about Indians who won the Victoria Cross and South Asian participation in battles. Britain did not fight the Second World War, the British Empire did.

However, this book aims to go one step beyond this. Rather than just looking at the contributions of South Asians to the war in Europe and Asia, it seeks to understand how the Indian subcontinent itself was reshaped by the war. How did the war impact on India’s ‘home front’? How did gearing up for total war, and the rapid re-purposing of the Indian state into a garrison, barrack and training camp for a vast army, affect and shape South Asian society? Beyond the well-trained and relatively well-paid infantryman or officer, which men and women propped up the Indian Army over thousands of miles of supply lines? How was the war experienced in small villages abutting aerodromes, or by young nurses in Indian General Hospitals?

As well as acknowledging the role of South Asian men and women, then, this means asking some hard questions about the social costs of war and the coercion that accompanies such a massive military commitment. It also demands that we pay proper attention to the people who have tended not to feature so prominently in military histories: the non-combatants and camp followers, the Lascars, prostitutes, nurses, refugees and peasants whose lives changed because of the demands of military commitments.

This book ranges across the subcontinent, from the commanding heights of New Delhi to the scrublands and jungles inhabited by *adivasis* and the villages of low castes

and *dalits*. It is a story told in many voices, by individuals – Indian, British and many other nationalities too – who experienced the war in various and often contrasting ways. It reflects the diversity of wartime experiences in India. Merchants, industrialists, soldiers, merchant seamen, agriculturalists or black marketeers, in small towns or mega-cities, on coastal waterways or in the mountains, all had their own ways of negotiating the challenges and opportunities of war. Some profited and many were impoverished. This book aims to give the flavour of these plural, and often hidden, voices.

Some of the experiences recounted here are universal staples of wartime: families separated over wrenchingly long years and vast distances, bravery in the midst of battle, the astonishing mushrooming of the state as it expanded and juggled the many tasks necessitated by the war, from postal services to ports. A defining feature of the war across the world was the upheaval of refugees and the movement of people on an unprecedented scale. The attrition of resources, the disruptions to labour and the effects of inflation caused by war are only just being recognised and fully researched as civilian dramas with similar contours, from North Africa to the Middle East and South-East Asia.

This book focuses on this nexus between warfare and society. Understanding the Indian home front is a way of understanding the pernicious, unforeseen and often deadly consequences of war on the lives of ordinary people. It is also crucial to understanding the revolutionary turn of events leading up to India’s Independence and the end of the Raj.

Looking at the events of the 1940s from the bottom-up or human perspective, rather than from the sweeping global panorama of war, also involves a moral dimension. The war was a just war against fascism in Europe and Asia, a necessary but painful corrective to the rising tide of fascist

and expansionist politics, which threatened the rights of millions of people. But it also had other implications and costs, many of which could hardly be foreseen or anticipated by its protagonists. The priorities of war forced people into difficult moral and personal choices. Imperial subjects could not necessarily evaluate the war as a ‘good’ or ‘just’ war whilst they witnessed the effect on their own lives, as they faced astronomical price rises, lethal food shortages and famine, the loss of young men on unknown foreign battlefields, requisitioning and other disruptions to their everyday existence. The war sharpened dichotomies between the wealthy elites and the vast number of the very poor, heightened social tensions and exacerbated differences of class, caste and religion.

Many societies have used histories of war or stories of national liberation to bolster their own cohesion and sense of national belonging. The 1940s have often been remembered in ways that have served national stories and myths. There is nothing unusual about this anywhere in the world. In India and Britain, after the decolonisation of the Raj in 1947, and in the latter part of the twentieth century, school curricula, textbooks, national myths and heroes developed along divergent tracks. For Britons, there was little reflection about the twilight of imperial rule and there was often amnesia about horrors such as the Bengal famine of 1943 that occurred on the imperial watch.

In India, similarly, the war was also overlooked or remembered in partisan ways. The Second World War seemed sometimes, from an Indian perspective, an obscure or even irrelevant subject for research or the preserve of nostalgic militarists. Although wartime had a defining impact on nationalist politics, the historical emphasis was on the Gandhian campaigns of national liberation and on the creation of the new states of India and Pakistan in 1947. Crucially, the leading nationalists had been absent from many of the major wartime events as they were

incarcerated. Nehru, the pre-eminent leader of his generation and the first Prime Minister of independent India, personally remembered the 1940s as ‘the quiet uneventful past’. He spent nearly three years in prison, his ninth period of detention: ‘We could only hear very distantly the far-off drums of the Great World War that was going on then.’[5]

The social history of the war itself – the arrival in India of soldiers and nurses from around the world, the employment of millions of labourers, the recruitment and overseas service of thousands of Indian soldiers, the panic and rumours about possible invasion by the Japanese and the profound economic hardship (and, for a lucky few, profits) – has remained outside the scope of South Asian history-writing, apart from in the work of a few exceptional historians.[6] Yet a better awareness of the war’s effects also helps us to understand the foundations of modern South Asia. As in Britain, it made the subcontinent a more recognisably modern place. Cities such as Karachi and Bangalore boomed, the infrastructure of airlines, companies and road networks was laid by wartime projects, and consumer imports from tinned food to fridges came onto the market. The Americans became more economically and socially influential than ever before. Middle-class women found new freedoms in work and activism, jazz and cinema thrived and, as in Britain, social expectations soared regarding what life would be like after the war. Nehru’s planned economy and the welfare-oriented, developmental state that he tried to craft after 1947 had roots in the Raj’s transformation of the 1940s. The explicit trust placed in the ability of the government to provide better healthcare or education was an offshoot of the wartime changes, just as it was in Europe.

The war flattened out the pretensions of empire, making ceremonial and ritual excesses look archaic, challenging old compacts between the King-Emperor and the landed elites. It mobilised women, workers and the urban middle classes

in radical new ways. It heightened nationalism, both in India and in Britain, so that older forms of transnational solidarity became dated and obsolete. The Raj was left in debt, morally redundant and staffed by exhausted administrators whose sense of purpose could not be sustained. Development and democracy were the new political aspirations for politicians in Delhi and in London. Ultimately, the war delivered decolonisation and the Partition of 1947 – neither of which were inevitable or foreseen in 1939. All this is not to undermine the considerable achievement of the nationalists over the long duration, their sustained resistance to the Raj was also essential in knocking down its foundations and creating the possibility of a new order. Both elements interlocked. But ultimately, the timing of decolonisation relied heavily on the damage done to the structures of the state by the war, and by the empire's complete lack of legitimacy when the conflict finally ended.

1

An Empire Committed

‘EVERYONE IS BUYING or if they can hiring radio sets’, Sydney Ralli recorded in her diary in Karachi in September 1939. A broadcaster and journalist, Ralli was married to an imperial tycoon, Charles, heir to a cotton textile and shipping fortune. News from Europe arrived by radio, newspaper and through family letters. Elites in India had a sharper appreciation of the threat of war in 1939 than many others because they were more likely to have access to a radio. ‘Every single person walks around with a gas mask … all the shops are practically empty, most of them closed at 5 o’clock. Everyone is doing some sort of national service. Sandbags everywhere. Everything is pitch-black at night and one is advised not to be out after dark as it is dangerous’,[1] Ralli wrote home, determined to share in the grittiness of war’s outbreak and to play her own part in the international drama unfolding.

The Government of India was busily announcing preparations for the defence of the Raj, air raid wardens had begun drilling and officials ordered the mobilisation of machinery and weaponry and began seeking contributions to the War Fund. The war also resonated through a network of family and friends back in Britain who sent detailed letters, riddled with mounting tension and apprehensions. Ralli even heard the details of other people’s letters, leaked

by a friend stationed in the censor's office in Karachi. But this initial sense of drama was short-lived and soon melted away. Ralli herself could not keep up the sense of suspense, when everyday life soon slipped back to normality. Within weeks, the atmosphere had returned very much to business as usual, with the war soon taking on a dream-like, fantastical quality.

India soon became a site of escape and release from war-torn Britain, a place where there was less scarcity and more security for Britons. This was still the time of the funny or phoney war. Despite premonitions of future destruction, such as the wide distribution of gas masks among the well-off, the war felt surreal and distant in India. Parents called back their children from European boarding schools believing they would be safer in India. When the newspaper editor Desmond Young's wife and teenage daughters came to India, 'they left shamefaced, for all three felt that they ought to stay whatever might be in store for England'.[2] As children were evacuated from the cities of England to the countryside, many of the children of the Raj came to India, especially after the fall of France, and found places in boarding schools in the hill stations of Mussoorie and Dehra Dun instead. 'With the more modern living conditions, fridges, and better though scarce medicines the old theory that children could not stand the climate for long was partly confounded, neither was it found to affect their schooling to any great extent', remembered Margaret Stavridi, the wife of an East Indian Railway engineer.[3]

Men in the Indian Civil Service (ICS) were exempted from military service and army officers looked less likely to be called straight to a fighting front. There were long delays creating a National Service system, and even once some 15,000 Britons had been registered, allocation to military roles was sluggish. In September, Sydney Ralli persuaded her husband not to sign up, encouraging him to continue working in the Naval Control Service in Karachi. She won her

husband round. ‘After all it is far better for him to do a job here, where he knows conditions than running up mountains with Gurkhas as a second lieutenant, tramping with his troops over the plains of central India. He seemed to think at first that he was shirking things but eventually became convinced.’[4] Ian Hay Macdonald, an Indian Civil Service officer based on the other side of the country in Orissa, looked on with some disbelief as the war unfolded in Europe and as he learned of his brother’s enlistment in the Royal Navy at Portsmouth and of bombers sighted over his family home in Scotland. Within a year several of his university class-mates would be dead. Later he would describe watching the war as if it was a show, ‘it is like being in a grandstand watching some game or other, we are so cut off from it here’.[5] As in Singapore, Hong Kong and the other great Eastern imperial cities, the war was impinging on life in random, occasional ways rather than apparently causing any real restructuring of the Raj. This brought guilt but also a sense of relief. The empire provided an extended British sphere, beyond the British Isles, in which some subjects could find sanctuary.

* * *

The colonial class in India felt indulged and fortunate compared to their relatives in Britain. Here they were protected by large whitewashed villas, long lawns, servants and drivers, and could acquire all manner of goods on the black market. ‘You would certainly not think there was a war on if you saw us here’, Macdonald reported from a relatively remote town in Orissa. ‘We get as much butter and bacon as we want etc. and there is no shortage of British goods, all sent out presumably to keep up the export trade … I must say I have had bad attacks of conscience at the easy life we lead.’[6]

The Raj protected the prestige of the European community and explicit segregation along the lines of race was common. Hazratganj, the main thoroughfare of Lucknow, where glass-fronted shops lined the streets, and diners enjoyed the city's famous biryanis, was out of bounds to Indians during certain hours of the day and they were banned from walking on certain sections of the pavements. Although never pursued as ruthlessly as in South Africa, the racial division was a recurrent affront to people. Signs saying Whites Only on railway platforms and in waiting rooms were still on display. A number of elite clubs, such as the Bombay Gymkhana, refused Indians membership. At Breach Candy, a racially segregated beach, 'Europeans only' could swim. Planters and factory managers unthinkingly prodded workers with rattan canes; police used *lathis* to strike at unruly crowds.

Nonetheless, Indian landowners, princes, industrialists and a small but powerful middle class of lawyers, journalists and academics lived comfortably too, and sometimes exceptionally well. Santha Rama Rau, a sixteen-year-old from an affluent family, returned to India in 1939 after ten years in Britain, to the relative comforts and safety of Bombay. She was learning again how to be an 'Indian' in an unfamiliar environment, and her memoir charts her growing racial consciousness in 1940s India, on seeing benches on a railway station marked 'Europeans only', her increasing sense of 'us' and 'them', coming from 1930s London where, as the daughter of a diplomat, she had had an elite, cosmopolitan and charmed childhood. As Santha Rama Rau admitted honestly on her return to life in a prosperous suburb of New Delhi, it was possible to insulate oneself from the sounds of economic desperation in the countryside. She could spend a whole day 'not thinking about the majority of Indians who are as foreign as the Germans or the French'.[7] For India's most wealthy minority, as for the British, the start of the war was of little consequence to their everyday

lives, creating the inconvenience of steeper prices and the need to acquire things on the black market, but barely denting the routine business of life.

Since the 1920s and the first wave of reforms which encouraged the participation of Indians in the running of the state, there had been a slow recognition of the rights of people to participate in the running of their own country. The devolution of power to provincial assemblies and the promotion of Indians to civil and military positions of leadership had been accepted as policy. Indianisation had been fully accepted in principle.[8] However, this 'Indianisation policy' did not automatically translate into an inevitable trajectory towards Independence. On the contrary, Indianisation was in some ways used to forestall change. Any devolution of power still had a number of vocal opponents, both within and beyond India, and the actual deadline for the British leaving India had never been enunciated. The 'readiness of the Indian to govern himself' was forever moving further away on the horizon, always subject to another set of qualifications or objections, always open to the charge that progress and liberalism had not yet been fully embedded. A new generation of administrators within the ICS – both British and Indian – had very different ideas: they sympathised deeply with nationalism, believed in ideals of material and political betterment and worked hard towards the ideal of a developed and more prosperous land. Indeed, these men would be in the ascendancy in the 1940s.[9] But even Nehru admitted in the late 1930s that his best hope was for Independence within a decade. A futuristic novel set in 1957, in which maniac Indians turned on their British masters 100 years after the mutiny, only to be crushed by the power of aerial bombardment, could still be published without any irony in Britain in the 1930s. There was no inevitability about Independence.

* * *

Lord Linlithgow, viceroy at the outbreak of war, had been in India since 1936. He had cut his teeth on Indian politics, not in the villages and towns of India but in Whitehall, by chairing important committees on Indian affairs in the 1920s and 1930s. A viceroy with no passion for India and only a little prior exposure to the country, he did not know the local languages and was similarly deaf to the nuances of Indian politics. Linlithgow's stiff, towering body looked almost designed for the viceregal robes and he made an imposing impression standing next to his wife, who was six feet tall. He had a touching fondness for his own children and grandchildren but everyone else found there was a touch of granite about him. He was described in *Time* magazine as having a 'half-dreamy, half-cranky' face, but Nehru less charitably assessed him as 'Heavy of body and slow of mind, solid as a rock and with almost a rock's lack of awareness'.[10] His limitations provided a rare point of agreement between Indian nationalists and many British civil servants. The Viceroy's own enthusiasm for the role had also rapidly diminished. When the Bombay provincial ministry brought in the prohibition of alcohol he found it 'something of a trial at public functions where a little anaesthetic is at times so very welcome'. He would ask for retirement on several occasions throughout the war, only to be compelled by Churchill to extend his term.[11] He would have been a passable viceroy during a quiet spell of the nineteenth century but was no match for Gandhi or for the formidable changes that the war would bring to India.

Linlithgow's weakness was that he imagined that his Indian subjects would feel the same way about war as him, that they would share the same fears about German expansionism, the same need to defeat fascism, and would unquestioningly support the prioritisation of war. Linlithgow, whose own twin sons were now fighting in Europe, took the British case for war as self-evident: 'our moral case is so strong it ought, I feel, to make an appeal to anyone who is

prepared to approach it with an open mind'. This was a risky and foolhardy position to adopt for a viceroy charged with convincing a sceptical Indian public about British war intentions.[12] His failure to consult and to make a concerted effort to join forces with Indian leaders at the very start of the war would have catastrophic consequences for years to come; within eight weeks, the new political settlement of 1937, which delivered Indian rule at the regional level, had imploded. The Congress ministries in United Provinces and Bombay resigned, followed by ministries in Orissa, Central Provinces and the North-West Frontier Province.

To many in Britain the Second World War was a 'just war', an epic ideological struggle. In 1939 for many imperial subjects, without any clear promise of emancipation from British rule even at the end of the war, matters were far less clear-cut. Linlithgow had a blind spot: he was completely unable to see the need to persuade or convince his Indian subjects of the moral necessity to fight, assuming that right-thinking individuals would see it with simple clarity. Several weeks into the commencement of the war he wrote, 'I see no reason why we should let ourselves become entangled in an academic argument about the merits or demerits of democracy.'[13] His calculation was that the majority of Indians would come to their senses and support the war effort. He was warned by numerous advisers not to miss the psychological moment and to win over public opinion to the cause. But the Viceroy stalled, returning to old stalwarts of the colonial regime, spending his time meeting princes and other old friends of the British in India. He admitted to being 'baffled' about how to recruit men and to get a war plan in order without any clear plan of action coming from London.[14]

There was a bastion in the Viceroy's calculations: 600 princely states, some with land masses as large as France or with populations to rival those of European countries. The Nizam of Hyderabad had been featured on the front cover of

Time magazine in 1938, celebrated as the richest man in the world. These princes, who ruled one third of the subcontinent's population directly but owed their strength to the Raj, liberally opened their purses and palaces, offering their services. One by one, maharajas offered their help to the Crown. The day after war was declared the Maharaja of Kashmir offered to leave for any theatre of war immediately in a letter of fealty to the British state: 'I have available in Jammu a reserve of man-power which has been judged … excellent fighting material and of this I have decided to give the benefit to His Majesty's Government.' He also offered for immediate active service two infantry battalions and one mountain battery for use anywhere in the world. The princely state would pay for these men and support their families while they were away from home; the government need only feed them in the field and meet their other daily requirements. The maharaja also invited the government to send recruiting parties into Kashmir as long as they co-operated with the local authorities.[15] The Rajput princes of Jodhpur and Bikaner made similar offers and within days several more states were making lavish donations: Indore gave five *lakhs*, Travancore six *lakhs*, Bikaner one and a half *lakhs*, the Nizam of Hyderabad set aside over £100,000 for the air ministry, and Maharaja Jam Sahib of Nawanagar promised to contribute a tenth of the gross revenue of his state to the war effort. The Nawab of Bhopal was so keen to get to the front or to serve in some other capacity that he had to be persuaded to stay in his city. The Maharaja of Jaipur was soon in North Africa inspecting troops.

The princes knew from their experiences of the First World War that this was an opportunity to cement their loyalty to the British and to prop up the existing political order. Many of them also had close ties to the military, had been educated at Sandhurst or in British schools and felt a strong affinity with the cause. The Nepali regent, desperate to defend his country's own sovereignty, surprised the