

INDIAN VOICES OF THE GREAT WAR



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*Also by David Omissi*

THE SEPOY AND THE RAJ: The Indian Army, 1860–1940



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# Indian Voices of the Great War

**Soldiers' Letters, 1914–18**

Selected and Introduced by

**David Omissi**

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For  
the Indian dead  
1914–1918

*Toute rien se tourne en declin,  
tout chiet, tout meurt, tout vet a fin ...  
se par clerc nen est mis en livre;  
ne peut par el durer ne vivre ...*

(Maistre Wace, b. Jersey, c. 1110)



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# Glossary of Indian and Military Terms

Afridi	A Pathan people inhabiting the NWFP; a member of that people
anna	One sixteenth of a rupee
atta	Wheaten flour or meal
babu	A high-caste Hindu, especially of Bengal, with a superficial education in English
badmash	A 'bad character' or rascal. From Persian <i>bad</i> , 'evil' and Arabic <i>ma'ash</i> , 'means of livelihood'
Bahadur	A great or distinguished person; the official title of a member of the Order of British India. From Hindi 'hero' or 'champion'
bazar	An Eastern market-place or permanent market, consisting of rows of shops or stalls, where all kinds of merchandise are offered for sale
bhalwa	A substance used by <i>dhobis</i> to mark and identify washing; employed by malingerers to produce swellings and inflammation
Brahmin	A Hindu of the first, or priestly, <i>varna</i> , noted for their aloof manner and fastidious preparation of food
brigade	A body of soldiers, composed of regiments, and forming part of a division
chapatti	A small cake of unleavened bread, flattened with the hand, and baked on a griddle
charas	Cannabis resin; hashish
charpoy	The common light Indian bedstead
chenna	A type of cottage cheese
company	A unit of infantry, composed of platoons, and forming one eighth of a battalion or regiment
crore	A hundred <i>laks</i> , or ten million (normally written 100,00,000 in figures)
dacoit	A robber, working as part of an armed band, whence dacoity
dafadar	An Indian cavalry NCO, corresponding to a sergeant
dal	Split pulses
Deccan	Southern, or peninsular, India
dhobi	An Indian washerman
dhoti	A loin-cloth
division	A body of soldiers, composed of brigades, and forming part of a corps
Diwali	The Hindu festival of light



Dogra	A high-caste soldier from Kangra, a Himalayan province
<i>darbar</i>	The court or public audience of an Indian ruler. From Persian and Urdu <i>darbar</i> , 'court'
<i>Fauji Akhbar</i>	The official newspaper of the Indian Army
<i>ghadr</i>	Revolt or revolution, whence <i>Ghadrite</i>
Ghazi	A warrior champion of Islam, especially against infidels; a title of honour. From Arabic past participle of <i>ghaza</i> , 'to fight'
<i>ghi</i>	Clarified butter
Granth	The Sikh scriptures
Gurmukhi	The alphabet used to write the Sikh scriptures; the Punjabi language, written in this script. From Sanskrit <i>guru</i> , 'teacher' and <i>mukha</i> , 'mouth'
Guru	A spiritual leader or head of a religious sect
Haji	A Muslim who has undertaken a pilgrimage to Mecca
<i>halal</i>	To slaughter according to Muslim law, by cutting the throat of the still-conscious animal; lawful food. From Arabic <i>halal</i> , 'lawful'
havildar	An Indian infantry NCO, corresponding to a sergeant
Hindustan	The plain of the Ganges, excluding Bengal and Bihar; sometimes all of India
Holi	An important Hindu festival, held at the approach of the spring equinox, in honour of Krishna and the milkmaids, and observed by sprinkling coloured powder or water on one another
<i>hookah</i>	A pipe with a mouthpiece attached to a long, flexible tube, and in which the smoke is drawn through water contained in a vessel
Id	The Muslim festival marking the end of Ramazan
<i>ilakadar</i>	A minor Indian official
<i>izzat</i>	Honour, standing, reputation or prestige
Jat	A member of a major North Indian cultivating caste-cluster, of proverbial stupidity
jemadar	An Indian junior officer, of infantry or cavalry
Ka'aba	The sacred edifice at Mecca, which contains the 'black stone' venerated by Muslims
kafir	An unbeliever in Islam. From Arabic <i>kafir</i> , 'infidel'
<i>kankar</i>	A coarse limestone, burned to lime or used for constructing roads
Karbala	The site of a battle in Iraq in October 680 in which Husayn ibn Ali, the grandson of the Prophet, was killed. The anniversary of the battle is commemorated by followers of Shi'ia Islam
Khalsa	The community of baptized Sikhs
<i>kirpan</i>	The ceremonial dagger, worn by Sikhs as a mark of their religion
Kshatriya	A member of the second, or warrior, <i>varna</i>
<i>kukri</i>	The war knife of Gurkhas and Garhwalis
<i>lakh</i>	One hundred thousand (normally written 1,00,000 in figures)

<i>lumberdar</i>	The registered head man of an Indian village, responsible for collecting community revenues. From English 'number' and Urdu <i>dar</i> , 'head'
Mahabharata	An ancient Hindu epic. In Sanskrit 'the great history of the Bharata dynasty'
<i>mahant</i>	A religious superior; the guardian of a Sikh shrine or temple
Mahsuds	A Pathan people of the NWFP
<i>maidan</i>	An open space in or near a town; a parade ground
<i>malik</i>	A tribal chief or village headman. From Arabic past participle of <i>malaka</i> , 'to possess' or 'to rule'
<i>maund</i>	A denomination of weight, varying greatly according to locality
Memsahib	A term of respect, used of a European woman in, or connected with, India; the wife of a Sahib
<i>moulvi</i>	A Muslim learned man, or teacher of Arabic
<i>naik</i>	An Indian infantry NCO, corresponding to a corporal
<i>pagri</i>	A turban
Pathan	A member of a mainly Pashtu-speaking people of the North-West Frontier and Afghanistan
<i>pice</i>	The plural of <i>pie</i>
<i>pie</i>	The smallest Anglo-Indian coin, worth one twelfth of an <i>anna</i>
<i>Pir</i>	A Muslim holy man, with inherited religious charisma
<i>pardah</i>	Seclusion, especially of Muslim women. From Persian <i>pardah</i> , 'veil' or 'curtain'
Rajput	A Kshatriya of the major North Indian warrior caste-cluster, noted for their bellicosity and aversion to handling the plough
Ramazan	The ninth (lunar) month of the Muslim year, rigorously observed as a fast from sunrise to sunset
Ram Ram	A popular Hindu greeting, invoking Rama, the seventh incarnation of Vishnu, and one of the most worshipped Hindu deities
regiment	The basic unit of the Indian Army, normally composed of four squadrons of cavalry or eight companies (one battalion) of infantry. On arrival in France, Indian Army regiments had an average strength of some 12 British officers and 750 Indian officers and men
ressaidar	An Indian cavalry officer, under the Risaldar
<i>risala</i>	A troop or regiment of Indian horse
risaldar	The senior Indian officer of a cavalry squadron; the head of a <i>risala</i>
risaldar-major	The senior Indian officer of a cavalry regiment
Sahib	A respectful title used by Indians in addressing Europeans; a gentleman; used especially in the Indian Army to denote a British officer
<i>salaam</i>	A Muslim greeting. From Arabic 'peace'

salt	Pay or duty. In Indian Army parlance, to 'eat salt' was to receive pay from the Government, and to remain 'true to one's salt' was to do one's duty
seer	A denomination of weight or capacity, equal in British India to a kilogram or litre
sepoy	An Indian infantryman, drilled under European (especially British) discipline. From Persian <i>sipahi</i> , 'soldier' or 'horseman'
silladar	Originally, a cavalry trooper who enlisted bringing his own horse, equipment and weapons; later, one who paid a deposit on enlistment to cover part or all of their cost, or whose pay was docked for that reason. From Urdu <i>silahdar</i> , 'armour-bearer' or 'squire'
sirdar	A military chief; an Indian officer
Sirkar	The state or government. From Persian <i>sar</i> , 'head' and <i>kar</i> , 'agent'
sowar	An Indian cavalry trooper or private. From Urdu <i>sawar</i> , 'horseman'
squadron	A unit of cavalry, composed of troops, and forming one quarter of a regiment
subedar	The chief Indian officer of an infantry company, ranking immediately superior to a jemadar
subedar-major	The senior Indian officer of an infantry regiment
sweeper	An Indian of the lowest caste, especially a Hindu who cleans away defiling matter
syce	A groom or horsekeeper
talwar	An Indian cavalry sabre
tehsildar	The chief official of a <i>tehsil</i> , a minor administrative district. From Persian <i>tahsil</i> , 'collection' and <i>dar</i> , 'head'
timuru	A kind of fruit used to produce boils and swellings
tola	The weight of a rupee, fixed in British India as 180 grains; a coin of this weight
Untouchable	An Indian, especially a Hindu, without caste, contact with whom is regarded by caste Hindus as defiling
Urdu	The language of the Muslim conquerors of Hindustan, derived from Hindi, but written in the Arabic script, and with a large number of Persian and Arabic loanwords. The nearest to a lingua franca for the army of British India. From <i>zaban-i-urdu</i> , 'the language of the (royal) camp'
varna	One of the four great castes (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishas and Shudras) into which all Indian society, except Untouchables, is ideally divided. From Sanskrit 'colour' or 'class'
Vishnu	One of the principal Hindu deities, holding the second place in the great triad. From Sanskrit 'all-pervader' or 'worker'
Wazir	A Pathan people of the NWFP; a member of this people
woordi-major	The Indian adjutant of a cavalry regiment
zaildar	A minor Indian official
zamindar	An Indian landlord

# Chronology

## 1914

4 August

Germans invade Belgium. Britain declares war on Germany.

End August

Indian Corps of two infantry and two cavalry divisions sets sail for France.

26 September

Two brigades of Lahore Division arrive Marseilles.

1 October

Indian Soldiers' Fund formally inaugurated to assist Indian troops in France.

21 October

Lahore Division arrives Flanders. Fed piecemeal into defence of Ypres (Belgium).

29 October

Meerut Division reaches St Omer.

October–November

Most of Indian Corps assembled in Givenchy-Neuve Chapelle sector (France) where they remain for nearly fourteen months.

2 November

Russia declares war on Turkey. British and French soon follow suit.

3 November

Censorship of Indian soldiers' mail established at Rouen (later moved to Boulogne)

12 November

Lord Roberts visits Indian Corps in France, dying three days later.

22 November

Poona Brigade captures Basra (Mesopotamia).

November

Sirhind Brigade arrives in France from Egypt.

November–December

Indian Corps involved in heavy fighting near Givenchy and Festubert (France).

## 1915

January

Mutiny of 130th Baluchis at Rangoon (Burma). Three Pathan companies refuse to embark, fearing they are being sent to fight the Turks.

20 January

Lady Hardinge Hospital for Indian troops opened at Brockenhurst Park, near Southampton.

15 February

Mutiny of 5th Light Infantry at Singapore. Half the battalion run amok, shooting their officers, fearing (wrongly) that they were to be sent against the Turks.

March–August

Scarcity, high prices and plague in Punjab.

10–12 March

Battle of Neuve Chapelle. Indian Corps and British IV Corps attack, suffering nearly 13,000 losses, but capturing the village and gaining some ground.

18 March

Failure of Allied naval assault on Dardanelles (Turkey).

22 April

Germans attack at Ypres using chlorine gas on a large scale for the first time.

25 April

Lahore Division arrives Ouderdom to take part in defence of Ypres. Allied troops land on Gallipoli peninsula (Turkey).

1 May

Elements Sirhind Brigade (Lahore Division) refuse orders to attack.

5 May

Lahore Division rejoins Indian Corps in front of Neuve Chapelle.

9–22 May

Indian Corps attacks in Festubert sector. No significant gains.

24 May

Italy joins the entente.

Early September

Sir James Willcocks relieved of command of the Indian Corps. Replaced by Sir Charles Anderson.

25 September

British Empire forces attack at Loos (France) using gas for the first time. Indian Corps attacks Mauquissart sector, with little success.

29 September

British-Indian forces capture Kut-al-Amara (Mesopotamia).

31 October

Lahore and Meerut Divisions receive orders to leave France for Mesopotamia.

22 November

British-Indian forces checked by Turks at Ctesiphon, sixteen miles from Baghdad. Retreat to Kut begins.

Early December

Turks invest British-Indian force at Kut. Beginning of five-month siege.

December

Lahore and Meerut Divisions transferred to Mesopotamia, via Egypt. Immediately (January 1915) thrown into efforts to relieve Kut.

19 December

Germans attack at Ypres, using phosgene gas for the first time.

## 1916

January

Allies evacuate Gallipoli.

21 February

Beginning of German assault on Verdun (France)

23 February

Mutiny of 15th Lancers at Basra (Mesopotamia). Muslim sowars refuse to march against the Turks near the Holy Places of Islam.

2 March

Lady Hardinge Hospital closed, after Indian infantry sent to Mesopotamia.

29 April

General Townshend surrenders to Turks at Kut, with 2,600 British and 10,500 Indian troops. Only 8,300 of the prisoners survive the war.

31 May

Naval battle of Jutland.

Early June

Husayn, Sharif of Mecca (guardian of Holy Places of Islam) raises Arab revolt against Ottoman Turks.

4 June

Beginning of broad-front Russian offensive under Brusilov in Galicia. Achieves great success against Austria-Hungary, capturing 450,000 prisoners by end September.

5 June

Death of Lord Kitchener when HMS *Hampshire* is sunk on voyage to Russia.



1 July

Beginning of Allied offensive in Somme sector (France). British Army suffers 57,000 casualties on first day. Indian cavalry in reserve for most of the battle (which continues until 18 November).

27 August

Romania declares war on Austria-Hungary.

6 December

Fall of Bucharest to Central Powers.

## **1917**

February

British-Indian forces recapture Kut.

11 March

British-Indian forces capture Baghdad (Mesopotamia).

14 March

Germans retreat to prepared positions of Hindenburg Line (France) scorching the earth as they withdraw. Indian cavalry occupy some of the abandoned ground.

5 April

US Congress votes in favour of war with Germany.

9–15 April

British Empire forces capture Vimy Ridge (France). Indian Cavalry see action.

7 June

British Empire forces begin offensive from Ypres salient. They advance five miles (to Passchendele) by November.

20 August

Edwin Montagu announces in Commons that HMG's policy is 'the progressive realization of responsible government in India as an integral part of the British Empire'.

10 November

Edwin Montagu arrives Bombay. He tours India until April 1918, collecting material for his report.

Late November

Indian Cavalry Corps concentrated for mounted action, to exploit hoped-for breakthrough at Cambrai (France). It does not come.

9 December

Capture of Jerusalem. General Allenby makes his formal entry on foot two days later.

**1918**

**March**

Indian cavalry withdrawn from France to replace British units in Allenby's planned offensive against the Turks in Palestine.

**End April**

Indian cavalry available for offensive action in Palestine.

**September**

Battle of Megiddo (Palestine). Heavy Turkish defeat. Indian cavalry take prominent part in pursuit.

**31 October**

Armistice with Turkey.

**3 November**

Armistice with Austria-Hungary.

**11 November**

Armistice with Germany.



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# Abbreviations

ADC	Aide-de-Camp
AG	Adjutant-General
C-in-C	Commander-in-Chief
CIH	Central India Horse
CO	Commanding Officer
CP	Central Provinces
DAG	Deputy Adjutant-General
FPO	Field Post Office
HE	His Excellency
HH	His Highness
HMG	His Majesty's Government
HQ	Headquarters
IEF	Indian Expeditionary Force
IMS	Indian Medical Service
IOL	India Office Library and Records
IOM	Indian Order of Merit
IWM	Imperial War Museum
L/MIL	Military Department and Records, India Office
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer
NWFP	North-West Frontier Province
OBI	Order of British India
OC	Officer Commanding
RFA	Royal Field Artillery
RHA	Royal Horse Artillery
UP	United Provinces (now Uttar Pradesh)
VCO	Viceroy's Commissioned Officer
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association

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# Indian Army Ranks and Organization

The Indian Army had its own system of ranks and organization, different in some respects from that of a European force.

Indian infantry privates were known as sepoys, and cavalry troopers as sowars. (For the Persian derivations of these words, see the glossary.) The non-commissioned ranks were roughly similar to those in the British or other European armies. For example, the infantry ranks of naik, havildar and havildar-major (lance dafadar, dafadar and kot dafadar or, later, dafadar-major in the cavalry) corresponded to those of corporal, sergeant and sergeant-major in the British Army.

There was no European equivalent, however, of the Indian officers. They held the commission of the Viceroy (but not of the King) and hence were known as VCOs, or Viceroy's Commissioned Officers. They had the right of command over Indian troops, but not over British; and they were subordinate to all officers who held the King's Commission (who were almost invariably British until well after the war).

The most junior of the Indian officers was the jemadar. Next came the subedar (or risaldar in the cavalry). Cavalry regiments had the additional rank of ressaidar between the jemadar and risaldar.

In general, VCOs were intended to serve as the link between the British officers and the Indian NCOs and men. Their precise tasks varied. They might include commanding a cavalry troop or infantry platoon, or being second-in-command of a squadron or company. Indian officers also carried out staff duties. The British quartermaster, for instance, might be assisted by a jemadar-quartermaster; the adjutant by a jemadar-adjutant (who, in the cavalry, was known as the woordi-major, or 'uniform major').

By far the most important VCO was the subedar-major, who was the senior Indian officer of an infantry regiment. Normally a man of long service, and great experience, it was his task to advise the CO on all matters concerning the religion and customs of the men under his command. (His equivalent in the cavalry was the risaldar-major.)

Indian infantry regiments normally consisted of a single battalion, divided into eight companies, grouped in pairs to form double companies. (The Garhwal and Gurkha regiments differed in having two battalions each.) Cavalry regiments were divided into four squadrons, each of several troops. A double company (or cavalry squadron) was normally under the command of a British captain, assisted by a lieutenant. The remaining British officers – a lieutenant-colonel, normally assisted by a major, a quartermaster and an adjutant – formed the nucleus of the regimental headquarters.

Most Indian battalions arrived in France slightly below establishment, with some 750 Indian officers and men, and normally eleven or twelve British officers. (British battalions were considerably stronger.) After a few months, however, fighting strength could fall to half this, and often less, while awaiting reinforcements. The battalions of the Sirhind Brigade, for example, averaged only 300 men after the Second Battle of Ypres in April 1915.

Regiments were normally either of 'class' or 'class-company' type. The men of class regiments were all of the same caste and religion. In class-company units, on the other hand, each company, or group of companies (squadrons in the cavalry) was of men from different backgrounds. Thus, for example, the 47th Sikhs, a class regiment, had eight companies of Sikhs, all from the Punjab. The 57th Rifles, as a class-company unit, had two companies each of Sikhs and Muslims from the Punjab, two of Dogras from Kangra and two of Pathans from the NWFP. (Full details of the composition of the regiments engaged in France can be found in Appendix II.)



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# Editorial Note

This book aims to give voice to the Indian soldiers who served in France during the Great War of 1914–18. I have therefore kept editorial intrusions to the minimum consistent with clarity.

In selecting just over 650 letters from a collection of many thousand, I have tried, above all, to be fully representative of the surviving material. I have, however, departed from this principle in three main instances, usually flagged in the notes at the end of each letter: (1) where many similar letters survive from a brief period, I have included only one or two examples to avoid tedious repetition; (2) I have included several unusual letters of particular human or historical interest, or of striking beauty; (3) I have tried to focus on the experience of combat soldiers, rather than that of rear-echelon elements such as supply and transport agents, or vets.

To aid clarity, I have adopted a standard layout for the letter-heads. I have used the short titles of the regiments preferred by the censor. (Full regimental details can be found in Appendices I and II.) Regimental numbers after men's names usually indicate their 'home' regiment, which was not necessarily the one with which they were serving (although the latter is often also stated).

Spellings of proper names have sometimes become garbled in transmission, not least because the censors, in their draft reports, pencilled through the correspondents' names, leaving many of them barely legible. Where it has been possible to identify individuals, I have, if necessary, corrected the spelling of their name (taking the *Indian Army List* as my authority). Numbers in brackets after officers' names indicate their approximate age. Medical officers' dates of birth are given in the *Indian Army List*; ages of infantry and cavalry officers are based on their known number of completed years' service, assuming an average age of eighteen on enlistment. Most of the NCOs and men, of course, would have been much younger than the officers, especially in wartime. Where Indian place-names can be securely identified, I have used the standard modern spellings of *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*. I have tried to supply missing information about dates, units, original language and caste, where there is enough evidence to speculate.

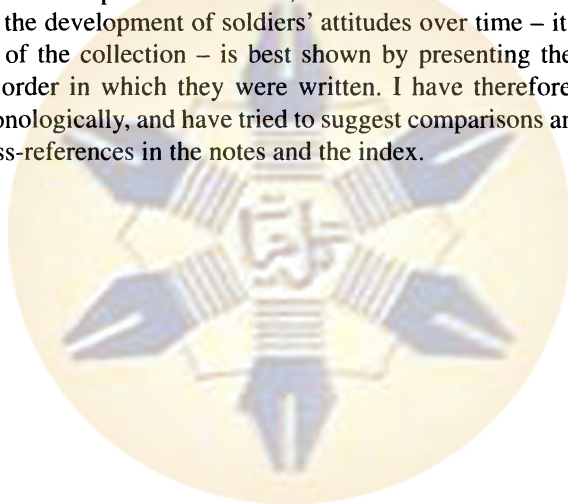
The censors often indicated whether a letter was passed, withheld, or modified through deletions. Where this has not been done I have not attempted to guess at an answer. But where letters are known to have been withheld, I have sometimes suggested a reason in a note, if the censor did not provide one himself.

In general, I have reproduced the wording of the letters exactly as it appears in the original typescript, with a few, minor, exceptions. The translators tended to under-punctuate (perhaps reflecting their familiarity with the originals). I have therefore repunctuated many of the letters in accordance with accepted modern English usage. I have broken a few of the longer letters into paragraphs, where these appear consistent with the writer's train of thought. I have also silently corrected obvious slips of

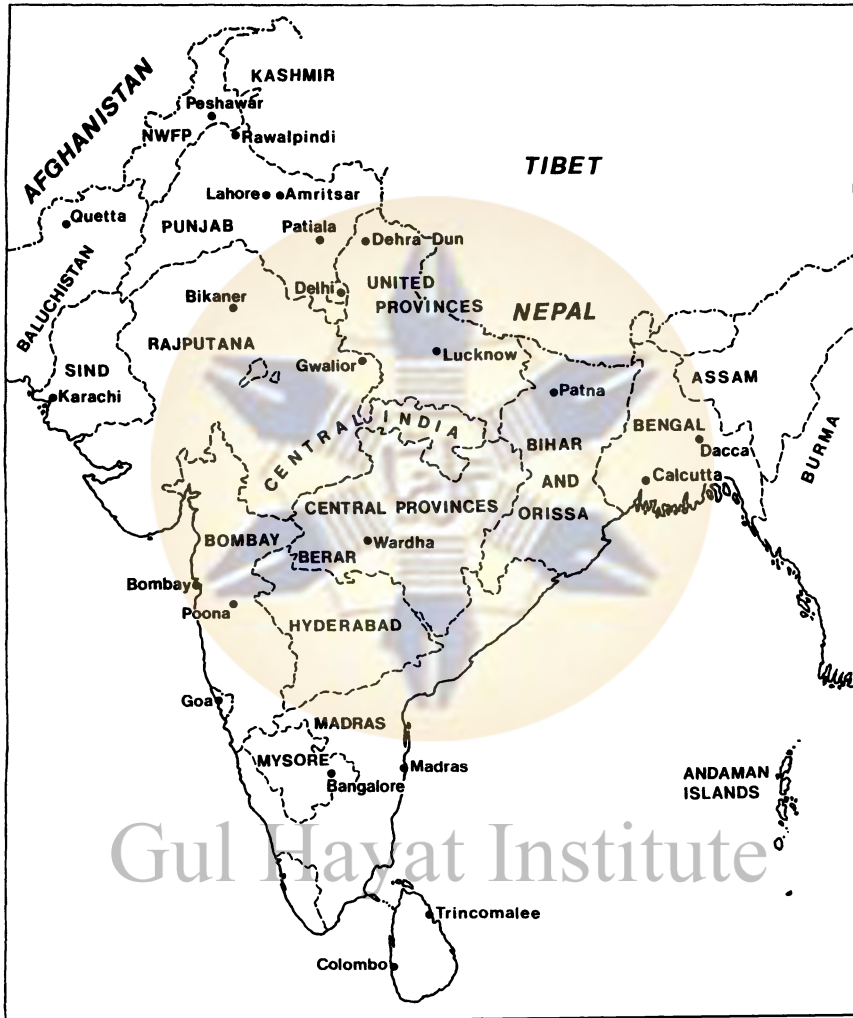


spelling or grammar, and typographical mistakes. (Letters originally written in English, however, I have left exactly as they were.) Square brackets indicate both my own interpolations and those of the censors. All are minor, and I have not distinguished between them.

At an early stage in this project, I had to decide whether to arrange the material chronologically or thematically. My first inclination (and that of publishers I spoke to) was to organize the letters into thematic chapters. This would have had the advantage of grouping related letters together, and thereby giving a rapid indication of the range of soldiers' responses to Europe and to the war. After some thought, I abandoned this idea. Many of the letters range widely in subject matter in a very brief compass. A thematic arrangement would have meant cutting already short excerpts into several separate documents, often of no more than a sentence or two. Furthermore, the development of soldiers' attitudes over time – itself one of the main themes of the collection – is best shown by presenting the letters in the approximate order in which they were written. I have therefore arranged my selection chronologically, and have tried to suggest comparisons and contrasts by means of cross-references in the notes and the index.

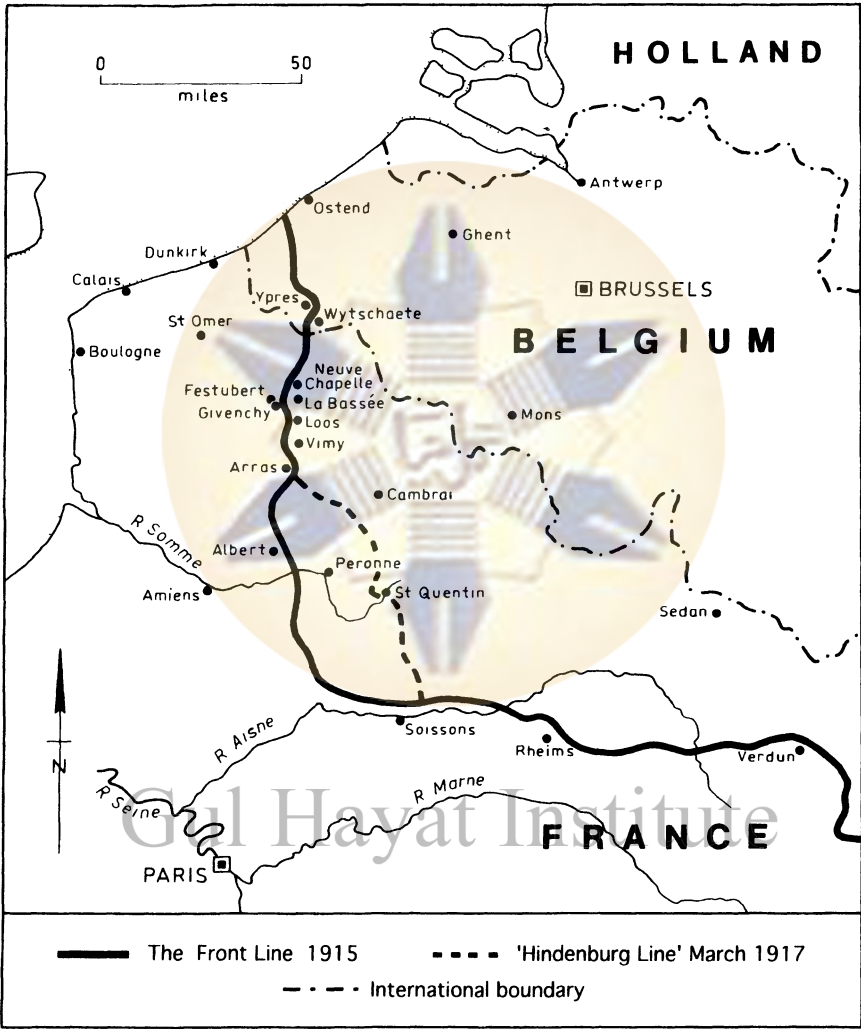


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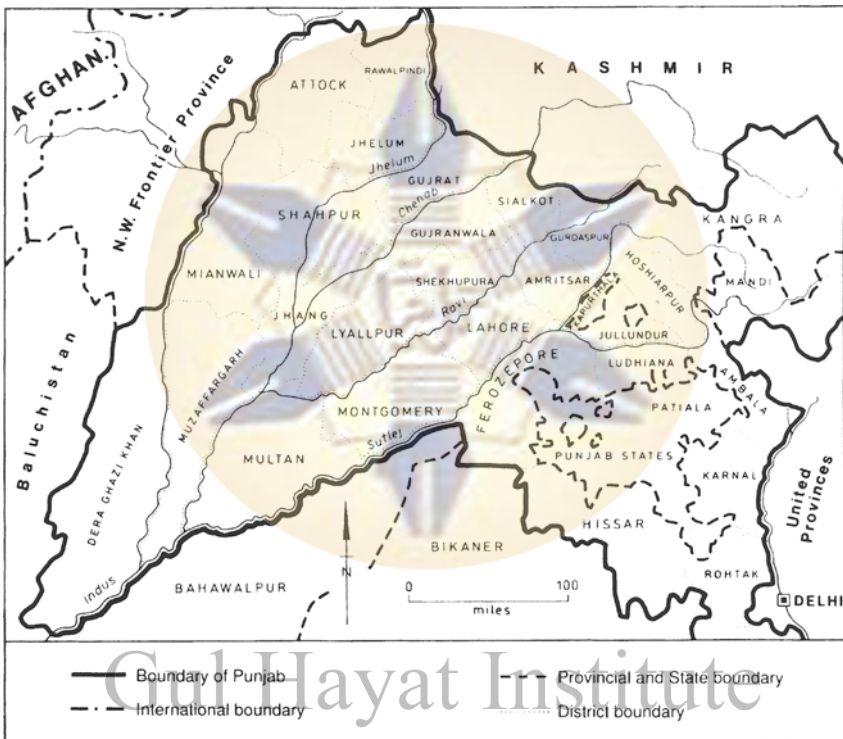


India at the time of the First World War





The Western Front, 1915



## Colonial Punjab