Book Review

■ Radhika Singha, *The Coolie's Great War: Indian Labour in a Global Conflict, 1914–1921*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Illustrations. 256 pp. $59.95 (cloth)

Over one million Indians served either as combatants (683,149 men) or as non-combatants (414,493 men) during World War One (20). Radhika Singha's *The Coolie's Great War* offers an excellent survey of these individuals' experiences, from recruitment to demobilization. The breadth of research, level of detail and wide thematic scope solidify the book's importance and showcase Singha's accomplishment. The author uses clear prose, insightful case studies, and impeccable research to enrich our understanding of World War One, imperial history, and world history. At the same time, the book also makes an important contribution to the historiography of colonial India by moving away from a Punjab-centered narrative. Over the course of the book, the author directly raises questions about what it meant to participate in World War One and undermines the dominant narrative of the war as a European conflict.

One of the challenges for any scholar working on this topic is the limited corpus of available sources that allow us to access the voice of the colonized and highlight their agency. Singha uses material from twenty-one different archives and twenty-three different newspapers, demonstrating both the scope of her research and her creative engagement with the sources. Her careful reading of traditional imperial sources from the India Office in the British Library, the National Archives, and the Imperial War Museum highlights the imperial nature of the war. However, she also uses this material to illuminate the interactions of British officers and policymakers with Indian laborers. Furthermore, Singha engages with letters from the non-combatants and combines them with sources from Indian newspapers to incorporate the often all too hard to find voice of subaltern non-combatants and to reconstruct their experiences.

The book highlights the experiences of Indian non-combatants in the army from recruitment to demobilization—detailing their struggles, the demands made upon them and the critical role they played in many of the war's campaigns. The first chapter, perhaps the densest, might be intimidating for undergraduate readers. Here the author profiles the individuals discussed in the book, blurring the contrast between different fighters and followers, contestations over wages, and the differences between various groups of non-combatant laborers. The chapter emphasizes how conditions in the military improved over

time and argues for the importance of acknowledging the critical role played by auxiliary personnel. In subsequent chapters of the book, the author is at her best when focused on individual case studies. The third chapter addresses the Mesopotamian campaign from the recruitment of labor, to the challenges of keeping workers, to the British reliance on human labor from India. The fourth, and perhaps strongest, chapter explores the recruitment of "tribal populations" from Bihar, Orissa and the Assam-Burma hills. The British waged what were essentially pacification campaigns to secure laborers. The fifth chapter focuses on the experiences of Indian workers in France, in an important challenge to the white-washing of the Western front. Singha concludes with an overview of the debates and contestations over demobilization as well as decolonization more broadly. Each chapter provides valuable context and illustrates the author's extensive research in a manner that demonstrates the varied, nuanced, and important role of Indian laborers during World War One.

The book makes a much-needed contribution to many historiographical fields, which will appeal to a wide range of scholars and enrich many different academic conversations. Perhaps the most important contribution made by the book is Singha's choice to blur the lines between combatants and noncombatants in World War One, and indeed in warfare more broadly. Non-combatants could use the war to frame and garner support for their demands because, as Singha emphasizes, fighting would be impossible without the contributions made by non-combatant workers, especially in moving materials. Workers also experienced war: they oftentimes found themselves under fire or, at least, at the "threshold of war" (247). The war also placed Indian soldiers and laborers on the same footing as British and Dominion forces, which complicated colonial assumptions about racially-based differences. Participants even overtly questioned racial assumptions and martial race theories. As local administrators and officials became increasingly disenchanted with high caste Hindus, the war provided opportunities for lower-caste Hindus and the "primitive" populations of India to demonstrate their value to the colonial state. Singha therefore connects the issues that arose in wartime with wider questions about the history of the British Empire and imperialism in general.

Singha makes an impressive and truly global contribution to world history. Her book models how authors can trace the complex, fluid, and sometimes uneven interactions between local trends, imperial concerns, and global events. For example, Singha links the recruitment of laborers from India's prison population with reports in the Indian press, the role of the British Parliament, and international discussions of "scientific penology," all within a single paragraph (111). At the same time, she highlights how the recruitment of "primitive" Indians from the "hill tribes" demonstrates the local influence of the war and the "escalation of ambitions and anxieties" which demanded the "incorporation of a stretch of virtually autonomous territory" and people into the global theatre of war (160).

Relatedly, the book explores how individuals and groups can harness global events, such as World War One, to contest and seek improvements in not only treatment and pay,

but also in how they were perceived by the colonial state. Throughout the book, Singha highlights workers' agency, as they demanded higher wages, escaped from military recruitment efforts, deserted the army, protested religious issues, or demanded pensions as compensation for their service. In one particularly striking example, the author demonstrates how the Kuki (a hill tribe along the eastern border) violently resisted British recruitment into the labor corps, although in this particular example connections to the wider theme of colonial resistance could be explored further (192).

Furthermore, inspired by Frederick Cooper and Jane Burbank's claim in *Empires in World History* that World War One should be framed as an imperial war, Singha addresses Indian contributions in terms of men, material and information (371). Here Singha joins other scholars in 'decolonizing' World War One, by emphasizing the importance of actors and resources from the global south and the interconnections between campaigns, both with the Western Front and beyond it (as in her discussion of the importance of the Mesopotamian Campaign). Even while dealing with World War One and its aftermath, the British were embedded in pacification campaigns and the push toward decolonization–in part the result of resentment over their experiences of the war. Singha's work also contributes to the growing field of colonial and postcolonial military history that pushes the scholarship beyond a focus on soldiers and battles to better understand imperial history writ large, social context, and the effects of local, colonial, and global campaigns.[1] Singha raises valuable questions for new areas of research in this field, such as the lives of soldiers postwar, the impact of gender and the ways in which other laboring populations experienced the war.

This monograph will be useful for students at a variety of levels. The selections on the Mesopotamian Campaign (also published in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*) add an important bottom-up perspective on the often-forgotten campaign of the war.[2] As the book raises important connections to the study of empire and highlights the overall issue of white-washing the war, Singha's chapter on Indian labor on the Western Front would also be an important addition to an upper-level undergraduate class on World War One or graduate seminar on any of the thematic focuses already mentioned. Finally, the work highlights important methodological and research issues that involve uncovering marginalized voices and archival research that provides a model for graduate students.

Thanks to Singha's ability to expand areas of research by asking probing questions that illuminate a variety of themes, *The Coolie's Great War* makes an important contribution to the overlapping histories of empire, World War One, labor history and world history. In an era of increased specialization and the fragmentation of historical scholarship, this book offers a reassuring example of how to contribute to multiple historiographic fields while crafting an insightful monograph.

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NOTES

1 See Gregory Mann, *Native Sons: West African Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Sarah J. Zimmerman, *Militarizing Marriage: West African Soldiers Conjugal Traditions in the Modern French Empire* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2020); Michelle Moyd, *Violent Intermediaries: African Soldiers, Conquest, and Everyday Colonialism in German East Africa* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2014); Timothy Parsons "All Askaris Are Family Men: Sex, Domesticity and Discipline in the King's African Rifles, 1902–1964," in David Killingray and David Omissi, eds., *The Armed Forces of the Colonial Powers c. 1700–1964* (Manchester, UK: University of Manchester Press, 2017), 221–48.

2 "Finding Labor from India for the War in Iraq: The Jail Porter and Labour Corps, 1916–1920" *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 49, no. 2 (2007): 412–45.