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Transcript

00:00:01 Speaker 1

Welcome to a writers war, a National Lottery Heritage fund, First World War Centenary project produced by Chrome Radio for the University of Oxford, faculty of Mediaeval and Modern Languages. In partnership with year 10 students from Oxford Spires Academy, we conclude this group of podcasts.

00:00:21 Speaker 1

With a discussion about responses to the First World War in former colonies of the British and French empires.

00:00:29 Speaker 1

Katrina, saith Marshall Foch, professor of French and Fellow of All Souls College chairs, a conversation between Professor Shantanu, Das, senior Research Fellow at All Souls College and Professor Toby Garfit, Emeritus fellow of Modelling college from across the Seas. They came.

00:00:51 Speaker 3

I'm Katrina, Seth I'm the Marshall Foch professor of French literature at Oxford, and we're at All Souls College, Oxford.

00:01:00 Speaker 3

As part of the Writers War project, so far, we've talked about responses to the First World War in France in Great Britain and in Germany. Today. I'm with two colleagues.

00:01:12 Speaker 3

Shantanu Das, and to be garfit, to be Garfit, is a recently retired Emeritus fellow of Modelling College Oxford who's done a lot of work on the war, and in particular on its repercussions in France.

00:01:26 Speaker 3

He coordinated a project which led to the publication of a bilingual volume on writing the Great War about French and English poetic responses to the war.

00:01:38 Speaker 3

Shantanu Das is a senior research fellow at All Souls College, Oxford. He's worked extensively on the way in which so-called colonial troops.

00:01:48 Speaker 3

Were involved in the First World War and he is the author amongst other books of India Empire and First World War culture.

00:01:57 Speaker 3

Today we're going to be talking about the way in which troops from the colonies of both Britain and France were involved in the First World War.

00:02:07 Speaker 3

Shantanu, could you start by telling us about?

00:02:10 Speaker 3

The way in which.

00:02:12 Speaker 3

Indians were involved in the First World War.

00:02:15 Speaker 4

Undivided India contributed 9.

00:02:17 Speaker 4

100,000 combatants.

00:02:20 Speaker 4

And 600,000 noncombatants. A total of 1 and half million. There is no homogeneous colonial war experience. Experiences varied according to whether someone was combatant or non combatant. Whether someone was fighting in Mesopotamia or in France.

00:02:39 Speaker 5

I'm talking about one and a half million from the Indian subcontinent. There were many non white people who served, some of them in combatant roles and many of them in noncombatant roles. Some of those left contributions in the form of song, occasionally in written.

00:02:56 Speaker 5

Of them probably not written in European languages, and so we've tended to forget about them.

00:03:01 Speaker 5

If we look at the French Empire, for instance, there will be things from West Africa, from Indochina from the Caribbean.

00:03:09 Speaker 5

They may not always be quite in the form that we would expect, but they are well worth looking at.

00:03:14 Speaker 4

In the South Asian context, the range of forms varies from songs often sung by the soldiers in the trenches to songs sung by non literate village women when their husbands or brothers had gone to war to testimonies by combatants and non combatants.

00:03:34 Speaker 4

In France, Gallipoli or East Africa to post war philosophical responses by intellectuals such as Rabindranath Tagore.

00:03:45 Speaker 3

Shantanu has this involvement of the Indians being recognised for a long time. Or is it something of which people are becoming more widely aware?

00:03:54 Speaker 4

I think over the last 10 years there is this increasing attention to the role of colonial non white troops. Between 1914 and 1918 hundreds of thousands of Asians, Africans.

00:04:10 Speaker 4

And Pacific Islanders were voyaging to the heart of whiteness, France and Flanders, and beyond Mesopotamia, East Africa, China, Persia, Gallipoli, Egypt to take part in the war. Many of these men from the so-called colonies of British, French, and German Empire.

00:04:31 Speaker 4

They're highly literary, but often non literate, and this distinction is crucial.

00:04:38 Speaker 4

Often in the villages of undivided India there was this tradition of songs, prayers, chants, Sir, understanding of what constitutes the literary needs to be reframed.

00:04:51 Speaker 5

Certainly the forms that were adopted varied enormously. Shanta knows mentioned singing in many parts of the world. It would have been natural.

00:04:58 Speaker 5

To express a response to war in the form of dance, as in the case of the sinking of the SS, Mon, which we'll talk about in a moment, but evidence, of course, is quite hard to recover.

00:05:08 Speaker 5

In terms of the sentiments, the striking thing is how different the agenda was from that of the classic European war poet.

00:05:15 Speaker 5

The conflict is seen in terms of a broader context, sometimes evoking past history, whether colonial or pre, colonial and different points of reference. For concepts like heroism, what?

00:05:26 Speaker 3

About the non combatants.

00:05:28 Speaker 4

Responses, undivided India. There weren't 600 noncombatants who had the hands and the feet of the RB as Kipling called them. They board the doublecross out say of both race and rank.

00:05:45 Speaker 4

And there were also the women we often talk about our grandfathers responses to the war but seldom about their grandmothers.

00:05:55 Speaker 4

I remember interviewing a Punjabi novelist Mohan Cologne, who said that his three uncles were killed in Mesopotamia and his.

00:06:05 Speaker 4

Grandmother went mad clinically, mad with grief.

00:06:09 Speaker 4

And their house in Punjab came to be known as the Garud, which means the asylum. So it shows how warp trauma reaches the furthest ends of the empire and often the silent victims are women.

00:06:23 Speaker 3

You have some family involvement with First World War.

00:06:27 Speaker 4

One of my great uncles served as a doctor in France between 1914 and 1918. In fact, he had an affair with the French.

00:06:36 Speaker 4

Woman being a nationalist, he returned to India. But this French lady didn't want to come to India. When my great uncle got married, she in fact send some jewellery for his new bride. What is interesting is that his brother in 1930s joined the anti colonial revolutionaries.

00:06:57 Speaker 4

In Bengal, and was beaten to death in presidency gaol Calcutta. My mother side. I've got another great uncle who served again as a doctor. Thankfully, not as a soldier in Mesopotamia, and in fact got the Military Cross.

00:07:12 Speaker 4

But we seldom spoke about them. There was this unease and discomfort to speak about these people in a post independent India.

00:07:23 Speaker 3

Can you say a little bit more about women's involvement on the Indian side?

00:07:29 Speaker 4

I think one of the most moving documents.

00:07:32 Speaker 4

I've come across is a letter by a young girl around 9:00 or 10. She's called Kishan Devi and she writes to her father serving in Egypt, saying that.

00:07:44 Speaker 4

Daddy, I'm learning how to read and write so that when you send home letters I can read them out to my mother and we don't have to go to the postmaster to have them read out. So from now on you can write whatever you want. Daddy, please come back home.

00:08:04 Speaker 4

We are all almost dead without you here. Please come back. That is one response.

00:08:11 Speaker 4

In villages of Punjab, even today there exists this whole tradition of women lament and this started during the time of the war when this non literate but highly literary women who grew up listening to poetry recitations to chance and to prayers move there.

00:08:31 Speaker 4

Bows into songs. Punjab was the most heavily recruited province outside Europe.

00:08:38 Speaker 4

There were entire villages there. There wouldn't be a single male beneath 25 left. I'll just read out a couple of these songs because they are quite heartbreaking.

00:08:56 Speaker 4

The war paints me like hot sand in a cauldron. Every household now has bidders married. Men win battles tell me. Oh firangi meaning oh foreigner, where is this written? Take the bachelors.

00:09:11 Speaker 4

To war, then victory will be yours, meaning don't take my husband to war.

00:09:16 Speaker 4

They sing songs like oh, go slowly or train go slowly for my husband is going to bostra or another song.

00:09:25 Speaker 4

War destroys towns and boats. It destroys huts I shed tears come and speak to me. All birds all smiles.

00:09:36 Speaker 4

They've vanished and they both sunk. Graves, divar, or flesh and blood.

00:09:42 Speaker 4

And I think they provide us with an archive of female emotions in the village, and in the absence of written documents, they fill in the gaps.

00:09:53 Speaker 5

In South Africa.

00:09:54 Speaker 5

The South African Native Labour contingent was set up to provide an African labour force to alleviate the shortage at the Western Front.

00:10:03 Speaker 5

And in French.

00:10:05 Speaker 5

The Ozark poet and educator, Isaac Williams Walkup, is credited with composing the only surviving war poem by a black South African soldier on active service.

00:10:15 Speaker 5

Now he was 64 years old in 1916, but woke up volunteered for the newly constituted native Labour contingent and he was on board the troopship SS Mindy.

00:10:25 Speaker 5

When it was struck by another ship in the English Channel in February 1917.

00:10:30 Speaker 5

He was drowned along with over 600 others, and as the ship was going down, he improvised a poem which takes the form of an oral battle cry in which the poet encourages his African brothers to die bravely. It was improvised during a dance, and the survivors remembered the dance and remembered the words.

00:10:50 Speaker 5

That he had spoken on the deck of the.

00:10:52 Speaker 5

Sinking ship.

00:10:54 Speaker 5

Now then, stay calm, my countrymen calmly face your death. This is what you came to do. This is why you left your homes peace our own brave warriors, peace you sons of heroes.

00:11:08 Speaker 5

This is your final day today. Prepare for the ultimate fraud. As you can see, this is the idiom.

00:11:14 Speaker 5

Of the brave warrior, but rooted in a particular cultural tradition.

00:11:17 Speaker 5

It's very difficult to know whether it's a myth, but some of this is relayed through workups disciple, a man called CK Macleay, known as the father of closer poetry and hailed by Nelson Mandela as a poet laureate of the African people. Now he didn't serve in the war himself, but in his closer poems.

00:11:38 Speaker 5

The Black Army and the sinking of the MND which he wrote in 1917, he wrote down something that is derived from that myth, and may have been derived from the actual words spoken by Walker.

00:11:50 Speaker 5

The Black Army includes a call to arms addressed to the volunteers who set sail on the ill fated, SS Mendy and so leave our shores.

00:11:59 Speaker 5

My peers for France remind yourselves of the poverty you leave behind defeat the temptations of the rootless. Satan, because you are where you are today as our offering, you go as the sacred.

00:12:11 Speaker 5

Sacrifice of the African nation.

00:12:14 Speaker 5

These poems have every right to be included in the Canon of First World War poetry. This is talking about heroic deeds about the warriors.

00:12:23 Speaker 5

Is it sarcastic irony to reassert black self worth in the face of colonial paternalism? I'm not sure. So these South African poems in the closer language combine a sense of.

00:12:35 Speaker 5

Loyalty to the British Empire 's war effort. On the one hand, with perhaps ironical affirmation of a greater loyalty to an African tradition that the empire has been reduced to calling on, and that will outlast the British Empire.

00:12:49 Speaker 4

I think we need to be very careful about what is being projected.

00:12:54 Speaker 4

Onto these soldiers I can hear Ballmaster missionary voice and the investment in this heroic rhetoric, where the actual soldiers who may have gone down in the MND they would have been absolutely terrified, and rather than subscribing to the ideology of Harrison.

00:13:13 Speaker 4

Would have been closer to someone like Wilfred Owen doing shared economist, Patria Mori and saying the whole irony of it all. So I'm thinking that often these voices are still being hijacked.

00:13:26 Speaker 4

By certain elite nationals who are trying to project a myth of heroism in keeping with what is prevalent in Europe.

00:13:35 Speaker 5

Indeed, well, here's a good example from East Africa from the Nyasaland territory, which today we call Malawi, where in the soldiers songs very rare. Example of a soldiers song that's been preserved.

00:13:46 Speaker 5

The lament that Germany has finished off our young men completely is coupled with a suggestion that the British officers took care over their own safety and we have the words in the song. Have you waged your roar, major Sir?

00:13:59 Speaker 5

So that's pretty heavily ironic.

00:14:01 Speaker 4

I think there's a tremendous colonial ambivalence, not because they're fighting for empire, but because to be fighting in France along with white troops, was almost a badge of honour. Today we think of imperialism and nationalism.

00:14:19 Speaker 4

As separate, even contradictory ideals.

00:14:22 Speaker 4

Whereas in the beginning of the 20th century, if we think of a history of emotions, nationalism and imperialism, actually very closely intertwined, Imperial War becomes a way of salvaging national and racial owner. At the same time on the part of the individual soldiers, there is tremendous ambivalence.

00:14:44 Speaker 4

I just read out a letter.

00:14:46 Speaker 4

Sir, this is Amir Khan, an Indian soldier writing on the 18th of March 1915, shortly after the Battle of New Chappelle.

00:14:57 Speaker 4

The enemy is weakening in the fighting of the 10th of March, according to my estimate, 5225 Germans were captured.

00:15:06 Speaker 4

Please God, I speak with certainty our King, God bless him, is going to win and will win soon.

00:15:15 Speaker 4

And yet in this letter I came across a separate sheet of paper which tell us a very different story.

00:15:23 Speaker 4

God knows whether the land of France is stained with sin or whether the day of Judgement had begun in France for guns and of rifle there is deluge.

00:15:34 Speaker 4

Bodies upon bodies and blood flowing.

00:15:38 Speaker 4

God preserve us what has come to pass from dawn to dark and from dark to dawn. It goes like hell that fail at monsoon, but especially our guns have filled the German trenches with the dead and made them bring with blood. God grant us peace for grace is needed.

00:15:57 Speaker 4

Oh God, we repent or God we reap.

00:16:00 Speaker 4

And most of the sepoy from India Sepoy comes from the Persian word sipahi. Meaning infantrymen were non literate but they grew up in this literary culture so that when they go to France and reached the trenches in September and October of 1914.

00:16:21 Speaker 4

Their innermost feelings erupt in terms of images and metaphors, and that is where I think the poetry comes. I will just mention a couple of their letters.

00:16:32 Speaker 4

There is conflagration all around and you must imagine it to be dry forest in a high wind in the hot weather or as tired blocks and bull buffaloes lie in the month of bad oh so lies the very world. Our hearts are breaking. I think this.

00:16:52 Speaker 4

Let us constitute the Indian literature of the trenches. These men had come so far away from Punjab.

00:17:00 Speaker 4

And yet they fall back on these postural images to express their feelings. I think the most moving piece or have come across is a song by a 22 year old Go Crazy Boy was taken as a prisoner of war. He was recorded by the Royal Prussian Phonographic?

00:17:20 Speaker 4

Commission just a few days before his death. It's a female lament that this 22 year old coca sepoy called Jazz Bahadur Falls back on and I'll just translate a few of these lines.

00:17:34 Speaker 4

With the rising of the Sissi River, I came carried in its bubbling flow. We arrived in the country Germany at the orders of the British listen. Oh listen, gold wearing little girl at the orders of the British.

00:17:52 Speaker 4

Listen oh listen, gold wearing little girl the heart cries sobbing and then he says panic Bulbul Yemen coach Albul.

00:18:04 Speaker 4

The bubbling of the voters, the restlessness of the heart, and it's almost on the matapeake

00:18:10 Speaker 3

Among the songs which are said to have been composed by non European competence, there's the Sugar Guard is Africa, the Africans War song, Toby? Could you tell us a little bit?

00:18:23 Speaker 3

About this please.

00:18:24 Speaker 5

This is the song that in the Second World War General De Gaulle first.

00:18:28 Speaker 5

Army adopted as the song of their campaign of liberation in 1944. It was composed during the First World War, probably at the Battle of the Marne, and there is a legend, but it's unclear what substance there is to this legend that one of the two composers of the song was a North African Muslim by the name of Bundy, Falha. Now the.

00:18:49 Speaker 5

Wording of this song could be interpreted ironically. I'll just read it to you on ARVO on ARVO on Avril. See newly Malka.

00:19:00 Speaker 5

Vandy Cooney pursue Villa pet.

00:19:04 Speaker 5

So forward forward forward.

00:19:06 Speaker 5

It's us the Moroccans later, the Africans who have come from far away coming from the colonies to save the fatherland, is that ironic or or not. I said that France was the country that was attacked, overrun by German troops felt itself.

00:19:24 Speaker 5

To be a victim.

00:19:25 Speaker 5

It was harder, I think, for French poets to express anti Republican or anti national feelings. Some of them did and.

00:19:35 Speaker 5

More and more.

00:19:36 Speaker 5

Poems against the war are being discovered for the colonial troops. I think it was even harder, partly because those had been educated in French.

00:19:45 Speaker 5

Schools had learned traditional French poetry. They hadn't been exposed to modern poetry to free forms.

00:19:52 Speaker 5

They tended to write rhyming verse in traditional metre, expressing traditional sentiments and so coming to save the Fatherland was something that they would expect to say, but we could interpret it after the event as an ironical sense, saying that we are the ones on whom the fatherland depends.

00:20:13 Speaker 5

And after the war, the Fatherland will need us, and they better give us some compensation by setting us free.

00:20:21 Speaker 3

Amongst the most famous writers around in the early part of the century was the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore. What was Rabindranath Tagore's view of the war in 1914? Wrote a few poems that are ambivalent, but from 1915.

00:20:41 Speaker 4

He was absolutely horrified by the war.

00:20:44 Speaker 4

For him, the main enemy was not just war, but the idea of nation, which for him was related to empire and he says in this terrible war the West had come face to face with what it had created and then over 1916 and 1917 he embarks on this remarkable.

00:21:05 Speaker 4

World Tour where he lectures across Japan and then gives 25 lectures across America, including at Harvard, Chicago and in Boston. He speaks to a crowd of 5000 people.

00:21:21 Speaker 4

Take home on.

00:21:22 Speaker 4

The Nobel Prize in 1913 and during the war years he was for us the most famous poet internationally in the way that he was known across South America, Russia, Europe, America, Wilfred Owen for example, reading in the trenches and Owen's final words to his.

00:21:40 Speaker 4

Beloved mother was a line from Tagore and then after Wilfred Owen's death, his mother writes to tag or saying Dear Sir Rabindranath, I don't have your address but I think you are so famous that the letter will reach you. Can you tell me in which poem of yours this line occurs?

00:22:01 Speaker 3

Amongst the Americans or the Caribbean soldiers, there were also a number of people who I believe reacted against the war in their writing.

00:22:12 Speaker 5

Yes, one of the most famous war poems from the Anglophone Caribbean is the Jamaican American Claude McKay's sonnet. If we must die.

00:22:21 Speaker 5

If we must die, oh, let us nobly die so that our precious blood may not be shed in vain.

00:22:28 Speaker 5

Then even the monsters we defy shall be constrained to honour us. Though dead. Oh Kinsman, we must meet the common foe, though far outnumbered. Let us show us brave and for their thousand blows deal one.

00:22:42 Speaker 5

Death blow.

00:22:44 Speaker 5

But in fact this was written in response to a lynching in 1919. The common foe was not the Germans, but the white mob. So can this poem still be considered?

00:22:54 Speaker 5

A war poem.

00:22:56 Speaker 5

But it's not specifically about the war, but one can argue that it's defined attitude. Voice is the betrayal felt by many black people after their armed service went largely unrewarded, and it clearly appropriates the ideologies of noble self sacrifice and manly fortitude. That saturated naturalist or propagan.

00:23:16 Speaker 5

So there are reasons for including that as a war poem, even though the occasion for it was not the war directly.

00:23:25 Speaker 5

Those 1919 lynchings were also the focus of a celebrated poem by the African American poet Langston Hughes along with Claude McKay. He played a prominent part in the new ***** Movement.

00:23:36 Speaker 5

Harlem Renee

00:23:36 Speaker 5

Songs and although Langston Hughes was only 17 at the time of the 1919 lynching, it remained in his mind, and ten years later he wrote his famous poem, The Coloured Soldier, in the form of a dramatic recitation, in which the growing sense of outrage expressed by the narrator is echoed by the fierce and angry reaction of the listening crowd.

00:23:57 Speaker 5

My brother died in France, but I came back.

00:24:01 Speaker 5

We were just two coloured boys, brown and black, who joined up to fight for the USA when the nation called us that mighty day.

00:24:09 Speaker 5

They told us America would know no black or white, so we marched to the front, happy to fight. It's a lie. It's a lie. Every word they said and it's better.

00:24:21 Speaker 5

1000 times that you're in France dead.

00:24:25 Speaker 5

Now this is a different form of life from that famously denounced by Wilfred Owen. The old lied ulcer decorum test probe battery on Maury.

00:24:33 Speaker 5

This is a lie that affects not just the business of war in the context of a particular Western society, but a large section of mankind suffering the pernicious effects of a centuries old racism and for whom the war actually.

00:24:45 Speaker 5

Offered a brief, deceptive respite from that history.

00:24:49 Speaker 3

Thank you for showcasing these different reactions to the war. What you've both brought out is that there are common responses across the different nations which sent soldiers to serve in the war and are non combatant affected by the war. A lot of the reactions, certainly at the beginning are ones.

00:25:09 Speaker 3

Of glory and hope. The feeling that possibly this war is going to bring a better life to all.

00:25:17 Speaker 3

This might be particularly true for the non European troops who believe that they are fighting on equal terms with their white brothers.

00:25:27 Speaker 3

That moment of hope is going to turn sour during the war when confronted with the violence and also after the war.

00:25:36 Speaker 3

When that brief period of empowerment for the non European troops who'd been side by side with their white brothers discovered that promises were not being honoured.

00:25:47 Speaker 5

That is true, but as Prantor reminded us earlier on, there was a lot of ambivalence in the sentiments of the colonial troops, and there's equally ambivalence among critics and readers of these works because it's easy to read them to hear them through the lens of post Second World War experience, it's easy to.

00:26:07 Speaker 5

Read back post War formulations of anti colonialism and political literary self-determination into the text, there is something of it.

00:26:14 Speaker 5

The seeds are there, but perhaps it's not as developed as it will become later on. In any case, we're reminded how painfully narrow our habitual perspective on war poetry is.

00:26:26 Speaker 2

Hey Terrell Aggie.

00:26:29 Speaker 2

Main Ihlamur beach now.

00:26:34 Speaker 2

Mama hi.

00:26:36 Speaker 2

Hey Terrell Aggie ajnabi.

00:26:48 Speaker 1

You have been listening to a writers wall. I do hope you'll join us for the next podcast in the series.