



## **BCMh Summer Conference 2012 – *Indian Armies***

# **LEARNING THE HARD WAY: THE INDIAN ARMY IN MESOPOTAMIA, 1914-1918**

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This paper focuses on the impact of wartime requirements for the military effort in Mesopotamia on the Indian Army, and on the recalibration of its relationship both to the wider imperial war effort in London, and within the domestic Indian context. It argues that the exigencies of meeting the vast logistical and operational requirements of the campaign in Mesopotamia, in particular, led to a decisive paradigm shift in 1916-17, away from earlier conceptions of familiar frontier-style limited campaigning, and toward the integrated mobilisation and extraction of all forms of resources.

### **Genesis of the campaign**

The preparations to send Indian Expeditionary Force D to the Persian Gulf in October 1914 overlapped with the preparations to send Indian Expeditionary Forces B and C to East Africa, as well as the larger deployments of Indian troops for France and Egypt. The dispatch of one Indian infantry brigade to the Persian Gulf was authorised by the Cabinet in London on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1914. Accordingly, the 16<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade of 6<sup>th</sup> (Quetta) Division was diverted from Force B bound for East Africa.<sup>1</sup> British officials at the India Office in London, such as the Military Secretary, Sir Edmund Barrow, were mindful of the importance of maintaining British prestige among the local tribal sheikhs in the British-protected sheikhdoms on the Arabian Peninsula, upon whose collaboration rested British commercial, political and strategic supremacy in the Gulf. Accordingly, Barrow suggested sending a military force to the Shatt al-Arab at the northern head of the Gulf. This would, he argued, reassure any wavering local allies of British support, demonstrate British military might to regional observers, protect the Anglo-Persian Oil Company's installations and pipeline at Abadan on the eastern (Persian) Gulf coastline, and cover the landing of any reinforcements which might subsequently be required.<sup>2</sup>

Following the declaration of war with the Ottoman Empire on 5 November, Force D was ordered to advance northward toward the town of Basra, which it captured Basra on 21<sup>st</sup> November. 16<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade was soon augmented by the arrival of a second infantry brigade (the 18<sup>th</sup>). A third brigade arrived in January 1915, followed by a second infantry division that would form the backbone of the proposed military advance up the river Tigris toward Baghdad.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Townshend, *When God Made Hell: The British Invasion of Mesopotamia and the Creation of Iraq, 1914-1921* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), pp.3-4.

<sup>2</sup> Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *The Logistics and Politics of the British Campaigns in the Middle East, 1914-22* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.33.

<sup>3</sup> Ghassan Atiyah, *Iraq: 1908-1921. A Socio-Political Study* (Beirut: The Arab Institute for Research and Publishing, 1973), p.41.



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The successful capture of Basra did not lead to a halt in military operations in Mesopotamia. Instead, and largely for reasons of prestige, the campaign expanded rapidly throughout 1915. This left Force D dangerously over-exposed across mutually unsupportable positions and dependent on a supply and transport network that creaked at the seams before breaking down completely early in 1916. The constant extension of operations took place against the backdrop of a lack of adequate oversight as it remained divided between London and Delhi. This reflected and reinforced the pre-1914 division of responsibility for military preparation and the collection of intelligence in the Ottoman sphere between the War Office in London and the Government of India.<sup>4</sup>

In the spring and summer of 1915, these political pressures led to the capture of the towns of Qurna, Amara, and Kut on the Tigris, and Nasariya on the Euphrates. Together, they left the Force dangerously over-exposed with a heavily over-extended network of supplies and transport back to the main base at Basra. The continuous expansion of the scope of operations occurred at the urging policy-makers in the Government of India in Delhi and (to a lesser degree) the India Office in London to extend the scope of operations beyond Basra. This flowed from the perceived need to maintain prestige and reflected the lure of a succession of ‘easy’ military victories that came at comparatively little cost to the attacking Force D during this period. Force D thus expanded beyond breaking point as its operational growth far exceeded the capacity of its overstretched supply and transport network.<sup>5</sup>

During the autumn of 1915, the lack of serious Ottoman resistance to the takeover of outposts in southern Mesopotamia intersected with wider British concerns to deflect attention from the looming disaster at the Dardanelles. British officials became acutely concerned about the perceived loss of prestige and increasingly anxious for ‘a striking success elsewhere in the East’ to offset the military debacle at Gallipoli. Hence, the potential prize of Baghdad became a tempting source of much-needed prestige as the fighting in Europe became an increasingly bloody stalemate.<sup>6</sup>

Accordingly, the Cabinet in London authorised the advance toward Baghdad in October 1915, but General Townshend’s 6<sup>th</sup> Division was checked at Ctesiphon on 22<sup>nd</sup> November and forced to retreat to Kut. There, he held out for 4 months as the Ottomans besieged the town and Force D made three disorganised and hasty attempts to relieve him and his men, before surrendering on 29<sup>th</sup> April 1916. During this time, the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Indian divisions were rushed from France to Mesopotamia alongside the 13<sup>th</sup> Division which arrived from the Dardanelles.<sup>7</sup>

However, the arrival of these 3 additional divisions along with all their auxiliary units brutally exposed the makeshift facilities at Basra and their limitations as a port and a base. Neither the base nor its surrounding facilities proved capable of handling the increased traffic in the absence of wharves, insufficient numbers of port lighters and tugs, and lack of labour and dry-

<sup>4</sup> Coates Ulrichsen, *Logistics and Politics*, p.36.

<sup>5</sup> Townshend, *When God Made Hell*, p.133.

<sup>6</sup> David French, ‘The Dardanelles, Mecca and Kut: Prestige as a Factor in British Eastern Strategy, 1914-1916,’ *War and Society*, 5(1), 1987, pp.54-55.

<sup>7</sup> Report of the Mesopotamia Transport Commission (Simla: Government of India, 1918), p.2, London: The National Archive (TNA), WO 32/5209.



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land availability on the river-front itself. All of these factors became critical to the backlog that accumulated, and fed off each other in an interlocking manner that created a mutually reinforcing sense of confusion and chaos at the base.<sup>8</sup>

### **Logistical and administrative mismatch**

Why was there such disparity between Indian Expeditionary Force D's operational and logistical intentions and capabilities? This section examines the reasons for the failure of the first half of the campaign, before the next section examines what changed in 1917 and why.

There were two major factors that determined the outcome of the initial phase of the campaign between 1914 and mid-1916. The first was the stringent financial constraints imposed by the Government of India on the conduct of military operations in Mesopotamia. Officials in Delhi, led by the powerful Finance Member, Sir William Meyer, consistently refused to sanction expenditure on the port facilities or other infrastructural works, such as a proposed railway from Basra to Nasariya to take the strain off the river, unless and until it was decided to make the occupation of Mesopotamia permanent.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, the Government of India simply did not comprehend the scale of state intervention and mobilisation required to manage and conduct industrialised warfare against a modern enemy. From the beginning of the war until mid-1916 (when its shortcomings in Mesopotamia could no longer be ignored), Delhi pursued a 'business as usual' strategy that did not depart from the cherished tenets of 'Indian administration,' notably low taxation and laissez faire economic policy. Remarkably, the military budget adopted in March 1915 for the 1916-16 fiscal year remained on an essentially peacetime basis, and the conduct of military operations involving the Indian Army (in Egypt, East Africa and Mesopotamia) was not discussed in the Viceroy's Council before 1916.<sup>10</sup>

The impact of this policy continually hindered attempts to expand the scope of the Indian war effort until 1916 even as operational requirements grew rapidly. The Adjutant-General of the Indian Army, Sir Fenton Aylmer, even referred to 'the terrorism created by the Finance Officer' [Meyer]. He concluded pessimistically that 'trying to get anything through at Simla is like a man trying to struggle through quicksand or a bog. He becomes exhausted by opposition on all sides and sinks'.<sup>11</sup> This policy placed the Government of India in stark contrast to the incremental process of strategic mobilisation underway in London in 1914-15.

The financial parsimony was magnified by a crippling lack of oversight over the escalating operations in Mesopotamia. This reflected the widening gaps in responsibility between the Government of India, the India Office in London, and the political and military officers with

<sup>8</sup> George MacMunn, *Behind the Scenes in Many Wars* (London: John Murray, 1930), p.215.

<sup>9</sup> Evidence of Major-General Sir George Goringe to the Mesopotamia Commission of Enquiry, 14<sup>th</sup> September 1916, TNA, PRO/CAB 19/8.

<sup>10</sup> Evidence of Sir Robert Carlyle to the Mesopotamia Commission of Enquiry, 28<sup>th</sup> September 1916, TNA, PRO/CAB/19/8.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Paul Davis, 'British-Indian Strategy and Policy in Mesopotamia, November 1914 to April 1916,' PhD dissertation, University of London (1981), p.250.



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Force D in Basra. Sir Beauchamp Duff, the Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army, refused to visit Mesopotamia during his tenure, and obstinately blocked all requests for logistical assistance. Both the political and military leadership in Delhi remained largely unaware of the progressive breakdown in the administrative services in Mesopotamia in late 1915 and early 1916.<sup>12</sup>

Their myopic attitude was also evident in the second factor that contributed to the catastrophic overstretch of Force D. This was the failure of staff in Delhi and London to recognise or act upon the urgent requests for additional river craft to meet the force's burgeoning supply and transportation requirements. The specific characteristics of the Tigris and Euphrates differed substantively from river conditions in India, in terms of their shallow draught and strong seasonal variations, although this was not appreciated until it was too late. This rendered the motley collection of boats collected from the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company and other suppliers in India unsuitable for service up-river from Qurna, and the difficulty of procuring such craft was further magnified when the Government of India informed Force D that it would not be possible to construct boats in India itself.<sup>13</sup>

This reflected the distorted and narrow base of British pre-1914 industrial development in India, which prevented the build-up of an indigenous 'military-industrial complex' with local skills-sets on the spurious grounds of 'national security'. As a result, orders for the river craft had to be placed in England instead and took many months to arrive. However, the bureaucratic inertia that gripped the Government of India and the India Office, as well as their lack of mutual cooperation or communication, caused long delays in their construction. Most notably, a major order placed on 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1915 for nine steamers, eight tugs and 43 barges remained largely unfulfilled as late as August 1916. By that time, only one steamer, the eight barges and 20 tugs had actually been delivered to Mesopotamia, arriving long after the succession of military disasters that befell Force D between November 1915 and April 1916.<sup>14</sup> In these circumstances, Force D became heavily reliant on river craft procurable locally. Large numbers of *bellums* (dugouts) and *mahelas* (sailboats) accompanied Townshend's advance toward Kut, and the ragtag collection became known as 'Townshend's Regatta.'<sup>15</sup>

Among the administrative staff in Basra there was growing recognition of its shortcomings, prompting a senior member of the staff (Major Kemball) to warn in July 1915 that 'if steps [are] not taken in good time to meet these requirements we are running great risks of a breakdown at possibly a serious moment'. However, the response from India was as emphatic as it was dismissive, as Duff warned the commanders of Force D not to bother him with 'any more querulous and petulant demands for shipping'.<sup>16</sup> His reaction was mirrored by the lackadaisical attitude within the India Office in London, where the Military Secretary, Barrow, was on holiday when Kemball's memorandum warning of a breakdown was

<sup>12</sup> Coates Ulrichsen, *Logistics and Politics*, p.91.

<sup>13</sup> Major R. Evans, 'The Strategy of the Campaign in Mesopotamia, 1914-1918,' *Journal of the Royal United Services Institution*, LXVIII (1923), p.256.

<sup>14</sup> Telegram from the Viceroy to the Secretary of State for India, 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1915, London: India Office Library, L/MIL/17/15/126.

<sup>15</sup> Townshend, *When God Made Hell*, p.65.

<sup>16</sup> Telegram from Sir Beauchamp Duff to Sir Percy Lake, 20<sup>th</sup> January 1916, TNA, PRO/CAB 19/20.



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received. Barrow subsequently admitted to the Mesopotamia Commission that the first he heard of it was when it was produced by the commissioners during the course of his interview (in 1916). This picture of institutional ignorance – both in Delhi and London – was further corroborated by the Secretary of State for India, as Lord Crewe informed the Commission that throughout his time in charge (lasting until May 1915) he had ‘no hint or warning that transport was deficient’ in Basra.<sup>17</sup>

### **The revolution in logistics, 1916-17**

What changed after April 1916? The Mesopotamia campaign ground to a temporary halt following the cathartic surrender of Townshend’s garrison at Kut. Over the next few months, the force underwent a thorough overhaul that tied in with a similar reorganisation of India’s contribution to the war. It took the shock of what had happened to Townshend to bring home the scale of the disorganisation of Force D and the mismanagement of the wider aspects of the campaign in Mesopotamia.

A Commission of Inquiry was set up in London to examine the failures in Mesopotamia and at the Dardanelles. During the summer and autumn of 1916 and the early months of 1917, its members received a stream of damning indictments about the lack of strategic oversight, operational planning, and logistical breakdowns that culminated in the shambolic attempts to relieve Kut. The final report of the Mesopotamia Commission was released in May 1917, after the capture of Baghdad on 11 March had gone some way to restoring British prestige and pride, but the severity of its contents prompted the resignation of the Secretary of State for India, Austen Chamberlain, and the public shaming of Duff, which later accounted for his suicide on 20<sup>th</sup> January 1918.<sup>18</sup>

More importantly, the administrative and logistical machines that functioned as necessary supports for the campaign were also transformed in late 1916 and early 1917. The War Office in London assumed administrative responsibility for the campaign in July 1916, having already taken over responsibility for its operational side in February.<sup>19</sup> Belatedly, the campaign was integrated into the overall British military effort and brought under a centralised framework for the first time. This ended the uncertain relationship between military planners in Britain and India, which had resulted in such disastrous gaps in policy and oversight.<sup>20</sup>

The importance of India to the campaign now shifted from one of operational control to the primary provider of manpower and material resources to sustain the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force (as Force D now was known). This better tapped the civilian as well as military resources available to the Government of India as it tardily launched the strategic mobilisation of resources that the belligerents in Europe had done in 1915.

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<sup>17</sup> Coates Ulrichsen, *Logistics and Politics*, p.47.

<sup>18</sup> Townshend, *When God Made Hell*, pp.335-36.

<sup>19</sup> Coates Ulrichsen, *Logistics and Politics*, p.65.

<sup>20</sup> Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, ‘The British Occupation of Mesopotamia, 1914-1922,’ *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 30(2), 2007, p.350.



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A major factor in the transformation of India's role was the replacement of the discredited and desk-bound Duff by a War Office appointee, General Charles Carmichael Monro, on 1<sup>st</sup> October 1916. Monro had commanded the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force at Gallipoli. He gathered around him a group of talented administrative officers with recent military experience in Egypt and at the Dardanelles, in a prime example of cross-campaign absorption of lessons learned.<sup>21</sup>

Another example of this trajectory at work was the appointment of General Stanley Maude as commander-in-chief of the MEF, on 28<sup>th</sup> August 1916. Unlike his elderly predecessor, General Sir Percy Lake, Maude had recently commanded 13<sup>th</sup> Division at Gallipoli, and his methodological approach had gained him the nickname of 'Systematic Joe'. Both Maude and Monro appreciated the complexities of modern industrialised warfare and the importance of placing military requirements for manpower within a deeper framework of strategic mobilisation of all forms of resources.<sup>22</sup>

The reconfiguration of the campaign took place on two levels – in Mesopotamia itself and in India. Over the course of the summer and autumn of 1916, the port facilities at Basra were rapidly expanded, and two subsidiary anchorages created at Magil and Nahr Umar to further relieve congestion. These measures increased the rate of tonnage discharged from 38,916 in July 1916 to more than 100,000 tons by mid-1917, whereupon fourteen ships could be berthed at a time and cleared within three days. Improvements to the organisational and administrative apparatus also proceeded apace and created a streamlined process for receiving stores and transferring them up-river. Together, they transformed Basra into a major regional east-of-Suez port.<sup>23</sup>

Equally important was the reorganisation of the transport services into a coherent body that was responsible for general transport policy, including railways and armoured cars. Directorates of Railways and Works began to recast the lines of communication that connected Basra to the forward units and defensive positions, while quantities of armoured cars and airplanes transformed the operational mobility of the MEF. Crucially, this freed it from its near-total dependence on the rivers, and enabled Maude to establish a chain of advanced supply posts, depots, and military hospitals along the Tigris in preparation for the resumption of the advance. During 1917, the network of railways expanded particularly quickly as lines radiated outward from Basra and – after its capture in March – Baghdad.<sup>24</sup>

The thorough overhaul of the administrative services of the MEF was an essential precursor to the eventual renewal of operations in December 1916. It occurred against the backdrop of the arrival in Mesopotamia of the full panoply of industrialised campaigning with all its enormous logistical requirements. As elsewhere, this created a powerful new dependence on

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<sup>21</sup> George Barrow, *The Life of General Sir Charles Carmichael Monro* (London: Hutchinson, 1931) p.132.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> 'Memorandum on India's Contribution to the War in Men, Material, and Money: August 1914 to November 1918,' India Office Library, L/MIL/17/5/2381.

<sup>24</sup> 'Report by Major-General H.F.E. Freeland on the Working and Future Development of the Port of Basra and of the River and Railway Communications in Mesopotamia,' April 1918, pp.17-19, TNA, MUN 4/6517.



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machine-produced goods as considerable quantities of heavy and light artillery, ammunition, and motorised, rail, and air transport all arrived.

The voracious demands of modern warfare therefore meant that the period between August 1916 and March 1917 marked a decisive watershed in Mesopotamia and in India. Three issues in particular were critical – the escalating menace from enemy U-boats and the consequent inability of British shipping to meet in full the campaign requirements in the Middle East; the decision by the War Office to utilise local resources to the greatest extent possible; and the general remobilisation of the British and imperial war effort in 1917 and 1918. The outcome of the intersection of these factors was a new policy that aimed to make the extra-European campaigns as self-sufficient as possible.<sup>25</sup>

### **Resource extraction and state consolidation**

In India, as in Mesopotamia, putting the new directives into practice required the colonial state apparatus to undergo a radical reconfiguration and bury cherished pre-war tenets of light-touch governance in order to manage the mobilisation and extraction of civilian resources for military use.<sup>26</sup> This continued even after the successful resumption of the advance in Mesopotamia culminated in the occupation of Baghdad in March 1917. Indeed, during the 20 subsequent months between March 1917 and November 1918, purely military considerations in Mesopotamia were superseded by post-war and imperial manoeuvring. They resulted in a stream of large-scale and labour-intensive civilian and infrastructural works, such as the development of major agricultural development schemes. These represented a practical response to the shortages in shipping to import foodstuffs and essential items for the campaign from India.

The rapid extension of the territory under MEF occupation after the capture of Baghdad created severe difficulties in meeting both civilian and military requirements for resources, notably food. These tapped into an earlier decision made by the War Office in London in July 1916 that the Government of India utilise locally-procured resources as much as possible to meet the needs of the MEF. Accordingly, in the autumn of 1917, the British authorities in Baghdad sanctioned a large-scale Agricultural Development Scheme as part of an ambitious project to gain self-sufficiency in wheat, barley, and straw.<sup>27</sup>

The intensification of local resource extraction therefore took place alongside the military conquest of Baghdad and its surrounding region (wilayat). Maude had stated as early as 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1917 that he expected that the city's capture would enable him to 'exploit the neighbourhood considerably for purposes of supply, especially food and fodder'.<sup>28</sup> These bulky items used up considerable transit space. With the occupation of Falluja on 19<sup>th</sup> March,

<sup>25</sup> Coates Ulrichsen, *Logistics and Politics*, pp.64-66.

<sup>26</sup> Clive Dewey, 'The Government of India's 'New Industrial Policy,' 1900-1925: Formation and Failure,' in Clive Dewey & K.N. Chaudhuri (eds.), *Economy and Society: Essays in Indian Economic and Social History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1979), p.232.

<sup>27</sup> Edmund Candler, *The Long Road to Baghdad* (London: Cassell, 1920), p.190.

<sup>28</sup> Telegram from the Commander-in-Chief of the Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1917, India Office Library, L/MIL/5/791.



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the MEF seized control of the fertile grain-producing regions in the Euphrates valley that fed Baghdad and its hinterland. The new Oriental Secretary at the British High Commission in Baghdad, Gertrude Bell, reckoned the Ottomans' loss of this rich food-producing region to be one of the most disastrous consequences of the fall of Baghdad'.<sup>29</sup>

As British control spread across Mesopotamia, the quantities of supplies demanded and local resources extracted escalated sharply. Political Officers fanned out across the occupied territories and were assisted by military columns that added a potent coercive spine to their efforts to win tribal loyalty by consensual means. An important exception was the Shiite holy shrine towns of Najaf and Karbala, which were administered indirectly through local sheikhs. The extension of direct (and indirect) control was facilitated by the establishment of a Directorate of Local Resources and by networks of Supply and Transport Officers who accompanied the Political Officers as they pacified local tribes.<sup>30</sup> Systematic labour recruitment into the logistical units of the MEF also accelerated sharply following the capture of Baghdad. These developments formed the backbone of the extractive institutions that now began to regulate the full mobilisation of local economic and societal resources for the war effort. They involved what the British euphemistically termed the 'submission by political means' of local tribes largely unaccustomed to the projection of centralised control over their affairs.<sup>31</sup>

In this period in India, meanwhile, the old system which had presided over the mismanagement of the campaign in 1915 and 1916 was swept away by what Clive Dewey has termed a 'temporary revolution in economic attitudes'.<sup>32</sup> The state moved away from the laissez faire economic policies and military retrenchment that had dominated before 1914 and toward an unprecedented, albeit short-lived exercise of centralised control and massive capital and military expenditure programmes. Thus, the Central Recruiting Board and Indian Munitions Board were formed in the spring of 1917 and established central control over the two major pillars of India's contribution to the war effort – agricultural resources and manpower.<sup>33</sup>

The Munitions Board extended state control over strategic industries that provided war material, such as railway track, ordnance factories, timber, textiles, and jute for the manufacture of sandbags. For its part, the Recruiting Board took measures to widen and deepen the field of recruitment and extend the geographical spread of recruits. This was necessary both to lessen the burden of providing manpower on the 'martial' provinces of the Punjab and the North-West Frontier Province, and to tap the hitherto-neglected reserves of manpower in the 'non-martial' provinces of southern India. It also brought together civilian

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<sup>29</sup> 'Report on the Najaf-Karbala district,' forwarded by Gertrude Bell to the Foreign Office and India Office on 19<sup>th</sup> July 1917, TNA, FO 371/3060.

<sup>30</sup> Atiyah, Iraq, p.227.

<sup>31</sup> Memorandum from Arnold Wilson to the Chief of the General Staff, G.H.Q., 17<sup>th</sup> September 1918, India Office Library, L/P&S/10/619.

<sup>32</sup> Dewey, New Industrial Policy, p.232.

<sup>33</sup> 'Memorandum on India's Contribution to the War in Men, Material and Money, August 1914 to November 1918,' p.20, India Office Library, L/MIL/17/5/2381.





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and military members to better safeguard vital agricultural districts and strategic industries from being denuded of local labour by escalating military demands.<sup>34</sup>

Together, the measures outlined above ensured that the Indian contribution to the imperial war effort expanded steadily in 1917-18 and peaked in the autumn of 1918. They enabled the military authorities in London and in Delhi to meet the substantial increase in demands that were placed upon the Indian Army during this period. Between early-1917 and November 1918 the Indian Army doubled in size and the British military authorities began to ‘Indianise’ the campaigns in Salonika and Palestine, which replaced Mesopotamia in 1918 as the principal drain of resources. This differed sharply from the British reserves of manpower and material, which peaked late in 1917 and declined steadily thereafter.<sup>35</sup>

#### **A breakdown averted by the end of the war**

Between 1914 and 1918, the number of soldiers India was responsible for maintaining had risen from the 75,000 of the British garrison in India in 1914 to over one million. In addition, India supplied all railway material for Mesopotamia and East Africa and substantial amounts of track for Egypt and Palestine and also made regular shipments of foodstuffs to meet shortfalls in civilian food supplies in each theatre. These figures are illustrative of the pivotal importance of India to the maintenance of all of the major extra-European campaigns undertaken by British and imperial forces during the First World War.<sup>36</sup>

The problem was that this ‘redoubling’ of the military effort in 1918 resulted in India raising an army beyond the capacity of its logistical base to sustain. The need to feed, clothe and transport the new mass army strained Indian food resources and transportation to its capacity and caused a near-breakdown which only the sudden termination of hostilities in November 1918 averted.<sup>37</sup>

This happened as in late 1918 when the large-scale diversion of rolling stock to military usage caused severe dislocation to domestic markets and intensified a general rise in prices which brought an already impoverished population even closer to the margins of subsistence. Military demands for railway track and rolling stock had pared the civilian network to its subsistence minimum by late 1917, when four-fifths of the available rolling stock was in military use.<sup>38</sup> As early as April of that year, the general shortage in shipping meant that rolling stock was diverted from transporting wheat and grain to carry coal from Bengal to the

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<sup>34</sup> Michael O’Dwyer, ‘India’s Man-Power in the War,’ *The Army Quarterly*, II (1921), p.255.

<sup>35</sup> F.W. Perry, *The Commonwealth Armies: Manpower and Organisation in Two World Wars* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p.95.

<sup>36</sup> ‘*Memorandum on India’s Contribution to the War in Men, Material and Money: August 1914 to November 1918*,’ India Office Library, L/MIL/15/52381.

<sup>37</sup> George MacMunn, ‘The Quarter-Master General’s Department and the Administrative Services in India from the Mutiny to the Present Time,’ *Journal of the Royal United Services Institution*, LXV (1925), p.118.

<sup>38</sup> Judith M. Brown, ‘War and the Colonial Relationship: Britain, India and the War of 1914-1918,’ in M.R.D. Foot (ed.), *War and Society: Historical Essays in Honour and Memory of J.R. Western, 1928-1971* (London: Elek, 1975), p.93.



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ports of Bombay and Karachi. This prompted Chelmsford to warn the War Office about the heavy strain being placed on the railways to simultaneously meet civil and military needs.<sup>39</sup>

The delicate balance between civil and military demands for rolling stock and foodstuffs finally broke down in the late summer and autumn of 1918 when the partial failure of the Arabian Sea monsoon caused poor harvests in central and northern India. The resulting shortages of grain, atta and flour caused prices to rise to famine levels in parts of India and led to food riots in Madras.<sup>40</sup> Scarce rolling stock had to be diverted back to civil usage to rail wheat from the Punjab and rice from Burma to deficit provinces. This was urgently necessary to avert localised famine and lower prices to politically acceptable levels. However, it forced the Government of India to finally take measures to reconcile the competing military and civil claims on the railways as the situation became critical.<sup>41</sup>

On 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1918, Chelmsford informed the Secretary of State for India, Edwin Montagu that ‘stocks of all food-grains will barely suffice to meet internal demands apart from Mesopotamia.’<sup>42</sup> Nine days later, the Government of India decided to end the further purchasing of wheat for export overseas other than to Mesopotamia, and appointed a Foodstuffs Commissioner to oversee the re-distribution of wheat and rice from food-producing to deficit regions in India. In London, the War Office reacted by instructing British authorities in Cairo and Salonika to investigate the possibility of substituting locally produced resources in the occupied regions of the Levant for Indian stocks.<sup>43</sup>

A complete breakdown in the intricate network of Indian supplies which sustained the extra-European campaigns in the Mediterranean and the Middle East seemed imminent, and was only averted by the end of the fighting in November 1918. The armistice thus came not a moment too soon for India which was by this time facing the devastating impact of the influenza epidemic, magnified by the constant movement of large numbers of men about the country and which eventually killed more than five million Indians.<sup>44</sup>

In the final analysis, it was India’s role as provider of agricultural raw materials and supplier of foodstuffs to a clientele of consumers in the Mediterranean and the Middle East that enabled these campaigns to be sustained for the duration of the war. The policy of utilising local resources, as envisaged by the War Office and the Quartermaster-General, Sir John Cowans, in 1916, successfully met the vast logistical requirements posed by the Egyptian and Mesopotamian Expeditionary Forces and their auxiliary and transport units. They also averted

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<sup>39</sup> Telegram from the Viceroy to the Secretary of State for India, 3 April 1917, India Office Library, Papers of Lord Chelmsford, Mss Eur E264, box 8.

<sup>40</sup> Telegram from the Viceroy to the Secretary of State for India, 2 October 1918, India Office Library, Chelmsford papers, Mss Eur E264, box 9.

<sup>41</sup> Telegram from the Viceroy to the Secretary of State for India, 17<sup>th</sup> December 1918, India Office Library, Chelmsford papers, Mss Eur E264, box 9.

<sup>42</sup> Telegram from the Viceroy to the Secretary of State for India, 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1918, India Office Library, Chelmsford papers, Mss Eur E264, box 9.

<sup>43</sup> Telegram from the War Office to the Commander-in-Chief, Egyptian Expeditionary Force, 7<sup>th</sup> October 1918, TNA, WO 33/960.

<sup>44</sup> Coates Ulrichsen, *Logistics and Politics*, p168.



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a full shipping crisis and allowed both forces to undertake major offensive military operations that resulted in the capture of significant swathes of Ottoman territory. By November 1918, the inexorable demands of modern warfare interacted with the external shocks to the system to place this network of supplies under extreme duress, and throw its continuation into 1919 into doubt. This is, of course a matter of conjecture, but it must be set against London's plans to further 'Indianise' the extra-European campaigns had the war continued into 1919, regardless of the logistical difficulties that this was placing on its supplier of last resort.

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