War through the eyes of the colonized

The Indian Contingent: The Forgotten Muslim Soldiers of Dunkirk (2020) by Ghee Bowman excavates the 'great untold stories' (4) of Muslim men from northern pre-Partition India (present-day Pakistan) who formed Force K6 in the Second World War. About 4,000 such men comprised mainly four animal transport companies in the British Expeditionary Force. They journeyed with their mules to France in 1939, and 300 of them were evacuated from Dunkirk. Bowman convincingly questions the insularity of the modern British memory of Dunkirk, which entirely omits soldiers from the British Empire. In its place, he offers us a rigorous, detailed and empathetic assessment of these Indian arrivals in France, Germany and Britain, revealing a fascinating and fresh history of military and cultural encounters.

The book is rich in granular historical evidence, underpinning both the Indian men's presence at Dunkirk, and their lives, loves and losses during the remainder of the war. Bowman has painstaking consulted a broad spectrum of archives (in times when it was possible to do so) – Scottish museums, French and German records, the National Archives of India, Delhi and the National Documentation Wing in Islamabad, Pakistan, alongside newspaper sources. There are precious few first-hand accounts available since the men whose experiences Bowman tries to recover were largely unable to read or write.

It is testament to Bowman's scholarship and historical skill that he is able to piece together these archival fragments carefully and attentively, which 'have been scattered like shards of a broken pot across British culture – in the office at Waterloo Station, in the *Abergavenny Chronicle* and the *Northern Times*, in the Pathé film archive and the Imperial War Museum, buried in fifty-eight graves.' (214) The impressions the soldiers made on English, Scottish and Welsh communities, often quite rural and remote ones, form the core of the book. Known as the 'Indian Contingent', these men were extensively talked about, filmed and photographed – and Bowman analyses how such memories remain vivid and alive even eighty years afterwards. This process of recuperation is considerably enriched by the interviews Bowman conducts with the men's families in Pakistan's villages and those whom they met abroad.

The results of one such interview yields rich dividends: Kalsoom Akhtar, daughter of Nawazish Ali, Quartermaster of 42nd Company in Force K6, produces for Bowman a book of her father's autobiographical poems written in Punjabi and the Potohari dialect for family and friends. The lines Bowman quotes from these poems are revealing in their humour and pathos. Nawazish Ali writes of England in the 1940s – 'O Lord! Save us from the Parathas of a foreign land /and grant us the food of our home.' (210) The yearning for the comforting, familiar flavours of a *paratha* or Indian fried flatbread is suffused with the strangeness of being abroad; the *paratha* evokes home through the sense of taste, all the more poignant because its itinerant writer is so far away from India.

Bowman notes that, in contrast to the sepoys, two elite Indian officers in Force K6 did leave behind a trail of wartime private papers and personal photographs. He describes how, from beginning life in the army as a sepoy, Major Mohammed Akbar Khan, a veteran of the First World War, was able to rise through the ranks. Another such officer was the aristocratic Captain Anis Ahmed Khan, who had graduated from the military academy at Sandhurst in

1924. However, as Bowman rightly observes, Indian officers in the Second World War were not treated on the same terms as their white British counterparts – they received lower pay, were unable to serve on courts martial, and were refused membership to certain social clubs. Racial discrimination, embedded into colonial employment practices, was hierarchical and layered: an Indian officer's post, with all its privileges, reflected this asymmetry in power structures.

Neither Major Akbar Khan nor Captain Anis, however, chose to rebel against British authority. Bowman notes how these two officers' wartime lives took very different trajectories. While Major Akbar's Second World War experiences led him from Europe to Burma in the Pacific theatre of war before his return home, Captain Anis could not be evacuated from Dunkirk and fell into German hands, along with the rest of 22nd Company in Force K6. The incarcerated men of 22nd Company became repeated targets for German and Indian anti-colonial propaganda. As Bowman explains, Indian political radical Subhas Chandra Bose had taken up arms against the British Empire in the 1940s and was recruiting for his Indian Legion in Germany from prisoners-of-war. Captain Anis, in fact, was visited by Bose and refused to defect, remaining imprisoned for five years.

In Bowman's assessment, although 30-odd men eventually defected to the German Army and 10 escaped, over 85% of 22nd Company continued to be held captive. Most of these men, not being officers, were employed in hard physical labour – levelling the ground for roads and railways, for example. Bowman reveals their loneliness and isolation by introducing telling details in the book: 22,000 letters written by loved ones in India to these imprisoned men were discovered only when the German camps were liberated by Allied forces. They had never been read.

It is in the book's epilogue that Bowman turns to the issue of memory and refutes the conventional narratives of war remembrance – that of youthful heroism and noble sacrifice. He observes of Force K6, '…these men weren't all young, they weren't all heroes, they didn't all choose to be there. The word "sacrifice" implies a choice, and some of these men had very little choice.' (213) Pointing out that Durnbach Cemetery in Germany, maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, today includes both the graves of five sepoys in Force K6 and three graves marked 'Indian Legion', Bowman dismisses the narrow binary of loyalty and treachery as a valid framework for studying colonial experiences of the Second World War. He writes, '…ultimately there were no heroes or traitors, only men and women doing their job, sometimes in pain and anguish'. (213)

In arguing for twenty-first-century perspectives on the Second World War, and on the millions of colonial lives that this war affected, the book restores a certain humanity to Force K6 men. On the 80th anniversary of the Dunkirk evacuation in 2020, it powerfully advocates for new research into a truly global history of this war – seen through the eyes of the colonised.

- Diya Gupta