



Triumph at Imphal-Kohima: How the Indian Army Finally Stopped the Japanese Juggernaut by Raymond A. Callahan.

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Historian Raymond Callahan (Univ. of Delaware) regrets in his introduction that students of the Second World War have not delved deeply enough into South Asia's role in the conflict. But, in fact, in the past decade or so, several significant studies of that subject, both scholarly¹ and popular,² have appeared. None of them would have been possible, however, without the earlier efforts of Callahan and others who have written about the Indian Army, the war in Burma, and British wartime leadership. *Triumph at Imphal-Kohima* brings to bear its author's deep knowledge of the war in South Asia, with a particular focus on the politics of generalship.

The book begins evocatively with a "deeply tired lieutenant general" watching the remnants of the Burma Corps stagger into India after being driven from Burma by the Japanese in May 1942. The general was William Slim. From this historical moment, Callahan turns to a quick history of the Indian Army, starting with its origins as the East India Company's private force in the eighteenth century. Officered not so much by scions of the aristocracy as by ambitious men eager to make their names (and possibly fortunes), the Army remained a more meritocratic institution than the British Army proper, where the purchase of commissions persisted until 1870 and a latent snobbery about officers in India lingered up through the 1940s. Slim's own career demonstrated the opportunities India offered. The son of a Birmingham shopkeeper, he joined the British Army in 1914. Wounded twice, he convalesced in India, where he petitioned to transfer to the Indian Army, joining the 6th Gurkha Rifles, the regiment he identified with for the rest of his storied career.

A leitmotif of the book is the "rivalry and tension" (12) between the British and Indian armies throughout Britain's rule in India. The author acknowledges that Slim's personality and determination dispelled doubts about his fitness throughout his military service. Moreover, despite his humble origins, Slim had begun his career in the British Army itself, in a battalion of the Royal Warwicks, and hence was not seen solely as a creature of the Indian Army.

The Indian Army was in a dreadful state in 1942; its masters in London treated it as source of manpower for the British Empire. In 1940-42, its soldiers (still commanded mainly by Europeans) were dispatched to North and East Africa, Iraq, and Iran. The colonial government in India's massive recruiting drive to replace more experienced soldiers yielded hundreds of thousands of raw, hastily trained troops. This ill-conceived "milking" of veteran soldiers from their formations into newly raised units only weakened both parties to the transaction. As a result, command structures in South and Southeast Asia broke down with dizzying speed under Japanese attacks in early 1942. Slim was chosen

1. E.g., Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941-1945* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2005), Yasmin Khan, *India at War: The Subcontinent and the Second World War* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2015), Srinath Raghavan, *India's War: World War II and the Making of Modern South Asia* (NY: Basic Books, 2016), and, though too recent for Callahan to have seen, Tarak Barkawi, *Soldiers of Empire: Indian and British Armies in World War II* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2017).

2. E.g., Frank McLynn, *The Burma Campaign: Disaster into Triumph, 1942-45* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2011), and Fergal Keane, *Road of Bones: The Siege of Kohima 1944—The Epic Story of the Last Great Stand of Empire* (NY: HarperPress, 2010).

to head the ill-fated Burma Corps against better organized, more resilient and mobile Japanese forces. To make matters worse, he butted heads over supplies and facilities with Gen. Noel Irwin, a British Army general leading India's Eastern Army at the time of the retreat. Callahan makes it clear that it was not inter-Army rivalry but Irwin's resentment of Slim's criticism of Irwin's Essex Regiment in East Africa that caused their mutual dislike. Unfortunately, Callahan never really clarifies how inter-Army discord contributed to the failures of 1942.

The author does detail the complicated project of transforming the Indian Army into the force that, by 1944, withstood a new attack by the Imperial Japanese Army on eastern India and then destroyed it in Burma:

Slim, reflecting on the lessons of the 1942 withdrawal from Burma, had realized that what was needed was hard, realistic training, allied to a doctrine for dealing with the Japanese and the jungle.... Slim insisted on the inculcation of a tactical doctrine that was clear, simple, comprehensive, and infused with his own core belief: "If the Japanese are allowed to hold the initiative they are formidable. When we have it, they are confused and easy to kill." Slim meant his soldiers to be able to go anywhere and do anything. (59)

Besides intense jungle warfare training, the Indian Army improved its logistics by instituting re-supply by air to enable troops to hold fixed, even surrounded, positions, while depriving the Japanese of matériel essential to their forward momentum. This system of "boxes" allowed forces cut off from overland supply routes to fight on or engage in fighting retreats, as Slim's 14th Army did during the siege of Kohima and the fighting around Imphal in early 1944. That victory secured Slim's reputation and his postwar elevation to Chief of the Imperial General Staff.

Callahan is well aware that the remaking of the Indian Army was not a one-man show, and that Slim was fortunate in the timing of his command. Others in India, including the Viceroy, Lord Wavell, and the Commander in Chief, Gen. Claude Auchinleck, promoted reforms in Indian Army practices and provided support for improved training regimens. And, too, logistics specialists streamlined the flow of supplies to eastern India, where US Dakota aircraft ferried them to troops in the field. The Dakotas were available to begin with because of American insistence that Britain concentrate its forces in northern Burma and eastern India to support construction of the Ledo Road for overland supply to China (129). Slim's approach, Callahan observes, succeeded against an enemy whose strategy and tactics amounted to "military lunacy" (116). Slim's "boxes" exploited the weaknesses of an under-supplied, overstretched, and stubbornly ill-commanded Japanese Army.

Callahan concludes with accounts of two colorful British figures: Winston Churchill and Orde Wingate. Churchill paid little attention to India during the war, and later gave the entire theater short shrift in his famous history of World War II. Callahan stresses Churchill's lifelong prejudices about India and the capacity of Indians to fight. Even the sterling performance of the predominantly Indian 14th Army, and Slim's own remonstrances, never changed Churchill's mind (134). Callahan's argument about Slim rebuts those who saw Wingate and his Chindits as anything other than an expensive and ineffective sideshow. He further quashes the Wingate myth by noting that he refused to include Indian troops in his force—the very troops who ran the Japanese out of Burma.

Apart from leaving open some questions, for example, regarding the impact of inter-Army rivalry on the Indian Army,³ Raymond Callahan has written an excellent guide to military policy in the South Asian theater, with a salutary emphasis on the tenacity of William Slim and the bravery and skill of his multiethnic 14th Army.

3. As in so many military histories, the book's map program is deficient, especially in the sections on Imphal-Kohima.