



Exhibition Press Release – June 2014
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

‘Empire, Faith & War: The Sikhs and World War One’ Major exhibition this summer in London

As the world turns its attention to the centenary of the Great War, this summer sees a landmark exhibition by the UK Punjab Heritage Association (UKPHA) to commemorate the remarkable but largely forgotten contribution and experiences of Sikh soldiers, as well as the families they left behind.

‘Empire, Faith & War: The Sikhs and World War One’ will be held at the Brunei Gallery, School of Oriental & African Studies’ (SOAS), Russell Square, from 9 July to 28 September, and is the launch event of a three year project to reveal the untold story of how one of the world’s smallest communities played a disproportionately large role in the ‘war to end all wars’.

From the blood-soaked trenches of the Somme and Gallipoli, to the deserts and heat of Africa and the Middle East, Sikhs fought and died alongside their British, Indian and Commonwealth counterparts to serve the greater good, gaining commendations and a reputation as fearsome and fearless soldiers.

Although accounting for less than 1% of the population of British India at the time, Sikhs made up nearly 20% of the British Indian Army at the outbreak of hostilities. They and their comrades in arms proved to be critical in the early months of the fighting on the Western Front, helping save the allies from an early and catastrophic defeat.

The Great War’s Forgotten Army

And yet their far from inconsequential role remains largely forgotten. Undivided India provided Britain with a massive volunteer army in its hour of need. Close to 1.5million Indians served, fighting in all the major theatres of war from Flanders fields to the Mesopotamian oil fields of what is now Iraq.

Surprisingly every sixth British soldier serving during the war would have been from the Indian subcontinent, making the British Indian Army as large as all the forces from the rest of the Empire combined – including the forces of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa.

The exhibition will see this untold, or at least forgotten, story put centre stage for the first time. Speaking before the launch UKPHA Chair, Amandeep Madra said:

“The British Indian Army’s contribution was actually greater than the better-known efforts of the white commonwealth countries of Australia, Canada and New Zealand put together. The non-white



LED BY IWM



Empire's efforts have largely been forgotten and their heroism and sacrifices omitted from mainstream narratives, or left as somewhat forlorn footnotes of history.

And yet men from British India in particular ensured that the Western Front wasn't lost in those vital first months, and then went on to fight the war's forgotten fronts in Mesopotamia, Arabia, Palestine, North Africa and beyond. Their contribution has never adequately been recognised or even told.

By telling the Sikh story we want to change that and remind the world of this wider undervalued contribution of the non-white British Empire. This is British history and a story that helps explain much about modern Britain as well as filling in a tragically missing piece of First World War history."

We Will Remember Them

Between 2014-16 UKPHA's 'Empire, Faith & War' project will commemorate the Sikh contribution and will include the creation of a documentary film, a commemorative publication, education packs for schools, and a mini touring exhibition.

A core aspect of the project will be the database of soldiers' and families' stories which will be created with the help of the community in the role of 'Citizen Historians'. The public will be encouraged to either discover more about their own ancestors who fought, or to 'Adopt a Hero', with help from online guides and other resources.

Crucially this will also include uncovering the lives of those left behind – the wives, mothers and others who waited anxiously for loved ones to return.

In this way, with the public's help, UKPHA will collect and share the stories of Sikh combatants and their families, creating new history to enable the world to remember the story of the Sikhs and World War One.

Exhibition Highlights

The exhibition itself is the centrepiece of SOAS's own centenary commemorations and will also serve as a 'recruiting sergeant' for UKPHA's community-driven effort to create new history, as the public will be encouraged to sign up as Citizen Historians.

The story of Sikhs in WWI will be told through original artefacts including unpublished photographs and drawings, newspapers and comics, postcards, stunning works of art, uniforms, gallantry medals, and folk songs sung by the wives left at home. It will also feature a unique album of X-Rays of wounded Indian soldiers' injuries by kind permission of The Royal Collection, Windsor.

It offers a unique opportunity to learn about this largely unknown aspect of the war and will also feature:

- a cinema zone featuring rare archive film footage including of the first Sikh fighter pilot
- sound recordings of Sikh POWs captured on the Western Front
- *The Trench* kids' activity zone and a *Wall of Remembrance*
- a pre-story section including original artefacts from the days of the Sikh Empire
- a series of associated Sunday Symposiums featuring expert speakers.

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NOTES TO EDITORS:

A) Exhibition

Dates: 9 July – 28 September
Open: Tuesday – Sunday: 10:30 - 17:00 (Late night Thursday until 20:00)
Closed: Mondays and Bank Holidays (and Sunday 3 August)
Admission: Free
Address: Brunei Gallery, SOAS,
University of London,
Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square,
London WC1H 0XG
Contact: T. 020 7898 4046 (recorded information) F. 020 7898 4259 E. gallery@soas.ac.uk

Groups of ten or more are requested to book in advance to avoid disappointment or overcrowding.

For further details of the exhibition including Sunday Symposiums, debates and performances see www.soas.ac.uk/gallery/efw/ and www.empirefaithwar.com/exhibition.

B) Sunday Symposiums

The series of Sunday Symposiums will explore various themes including the Western Front, the Forgotten Fronts, individual stories of valour, soldiers' experiences, and the families left behind. More details will be published on the gallery and project websites shortly.

C) The Project 'Empire, Faith & War: The Sikhs and World War One'

'Empire, Faith & War' is a multifaceted three year project (2014-16) funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). In collaboration with its audience and major heritage partners, including the Imperial War Museum, British Library and National Army Museum, UKPHA aims to collect and share the stories of Sikh soldiers and the families that they left behind.

The public, both Sikhs and non-Sikhs will be encouraged to become Citizen Historians and help create new history. In addition the project offers some 140 volunteer opportunities across 20 roles in a range of creative, technical and research roles which will lead to transferable skills and valuable life experiences.

The project will result in a variety of outputs, aside from this summer's launch exhibition, including a commemorative film, publication, touring exhibition and database of stories linked to the IWM's 'Lives of the First World War' project. Education packs for schools will also be created and all outputs will be free to access.

For more see www.empirefaithwar.com.

D) UKPHA

The UK Punjab Heritage Association (UKPHA) is an expert-led charity dedicated to preserving the cultural heritage of the Sikhs and Punjab with over a decade long track record including books, websites, exhibitions and consultancy with major heritage institutions and media outlets.

For more see www.ukpha.org.

E) Sikhs in Britain

There are approximately 27 million Sikhs worldwide, of which some 423,000 live in the UK (2012 Census). Sikhs have been present in the UK since 1854 when the last ruler of the Sikh Empire, the boy king Maharaja Duleep Singh, was exiled from Punjab. The majority of Sikhs have arrived post World War Two, many from military backgrounds with generations of service in the British Indian Army.

F) Images:

1. 'Stalwarts from the East' A French lady pins a flower on the Sikh saviours of France, Paris, 1916. (Toor Collection)
2. Men of the 15th Sikh Regiment spend time with the locals in a Flanders village after weeks in the trenches of the Western Front, c. 1915. (UKPHA Archive)
3. A Sikh soldier in a German prisoner-of-war camp, c. 1915. (Toor Collection)
4. Belgium street kids taunt a German soldier by dressing up as Sikh soldiers, c.1915. (Toor Collection)
5. A listing of captive Sikh soldiers who underwent a study into their racial origins by German scientists, c. 1918. (UKPHA Archive)
6. Sikh and British wounded recovering from injuries sustained in the front line to their left hand or arm, Southampton, c. November 1914. (UKPHA Archive)
7. Front cover of *The Great War* magazine showing men of the 45th Sikhs serving with the British troops on the banks of the Tigris River marching with their sacred scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib, in Mesopotamia, 1918. (Courtesy of Nanaki and Sahib Collected Works)
8. A propaganda postcard praising the contribution of Indian soldiers to the Allied cause, c. 1915. (UKPHA Archive)
9. 'For the glory of the Raj: Indian troops charging the German trenches at Neuve Chapelle, March, 1915'. An engraving after a painting by Richard Caton Woodville, Jr. (Courtesy of Nanaki and Sahib Collected Works)
10. A profile sketch of Sohan Singh, the son of a Sikh farmer from Harpoke, a village in Punjab (now in Pakistan). He was born around 1894, and joined the 58th Vaughan's Rifles (Frontier Force), a regiment in Britain's Indian Army, probably just before war broke out. During the First World War, the regiment served on the Western Front in 1914-15, fighting in the Battles of La Bassee, Givenchy, Neuve Chapelle, Aubers Ridge and Loos.

Sohan Singh was captured by the Germans and held prisoner in the Wünsdorf Camp near Berlin. It was here that the likeness of the 22-year-old Sikh soldier was captured by Hermann Struck, a German Jewish artist who published a book containing 100 of his portraits of prisoners of war. (UKPHA Archive)

For further information and interviews contact:

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