

German treatment of, and attitudes towards, Sikhs and Sikh prisoners of war

Germany was formed as a European nation state in 1871 and only became interested in acquiring an overseas colonial empire after William the Second became emperor in 1888.

The territories which Germany subsequently accumulated were very modest by comparison with those of the British and French Empires.

Once the First World War broke out the German government vilified its enemies for using “racially inferior” colonial troops against white European soldiers on the Western Front. Based on the Social Darwinist thinking prevalent in Europe at the time the Germans argued that it set a dangerous precedent and undermined the notion of white European superiority that justified European imperialism in general.

Despite this conviction, German military authorities saw an opportunity to undermine the

war effort of the British and French empires by deliberately appealing to their colonial subjects to rebel and by attempting to suborn their colonial troops in Europe.

The fact that millions of Muslims were subject to British and French colonial rule and figured strongly among their colonial forces in particular appeared heaven sent. Before the First World War, the German Emperor had cast himself as a protector of Islam. In 1914, the German government allowed orientalist archaeologist Max von Oppenheim to establish an official Jihad Bureau to encourage a Muslim revolt against the Allied powers. When the Ottoman Empire declared war on the Allies in November 1914, the Germans persuaded the Ottoman sultan, Mehmet V, to declare jihad against Britain, France and Russia in his spiritual role as Khalifa. He called on all Muslims to rise up against the Allies. The Germans deliberately paraded 14 French prisoners of war from North Africa at the German Embassy in Istanbul as jihad was declared by the

Sultan. These soldiers shouted chants and slogans in favour of jihad against the Allies.

In 1915, a joint German and Ottoman diplomatic mission was sent to Kabul in neutral Afghanistan to try and persuade the Afghan emir (king) to invade British India (the mission failed). The Indian provisional government also set up in Kabul in the same year made up of anti-British Indian exiles gained little support in India itself.

Oppenheim established a jihadist radicalisation camp, known as the Half Moon Camp (reflecting the fact that it housed a mosque surmounted with a large Islamic crescent) at the town of Wunsdorf near Berlin. Throughout the war this housed between four and five thousand African and Indian Muslim prisoners of war. They were subjected to jihadist propaganda by the Germans who also built a mosque at the camp – the first in Germany. However, there were very few recruits to the German cause.

Among the non-Muslim prisoners held at the camp were around a hundred Sikhs of the British Indian Army. The Germans were keen to exploit any anti-British feeling among Sikhs that they could find and were well aware of the potential such feelings had to undermine British rule in India. As a result of racist treatment and persecution by Canadian authorities of Sikh and other Indian migrants in the first decade of the twentieth century, many Sikh migrants in North America became radically anti-British Indian nationalists. In 1913 the Ghadar (literally revolt or mutiny) Party was established with the aim of overthrowing the British Raj by popular revolution. Many of the members of this new party were Sikhs.

When the Germans founded an Indian Independence Committee in Berlin on the outbreak of war consisting of Indian exiles and radicals, it backed Ghadar plans to start a mutiny in the British Indian Army, which they hoped would spark a wider revolution in India. Up to

eight thousand Indian migrants returned to India from North America (many of them were Sikhs and over half veterans of the British Indian Army). However, British intelligence prevented an attempted mutiny in February 1915 including among Sikh regiments in Lahore. The Ghadar agents were confined to their villages, imprisoned or, in some cases, executed. Further Ghadar attempts against British rule in India were also foiled as were German attempts to smuggle arms to India to support a revolt.

It was hoped that Sikh prisoners of war in Germany itself might be susceptible to persuasion. They were well treated like other prisoners, offered material incentives to defect and were subject to anti-British propaganda. Newsletters written in Urdu and Hindi encouraged Indian soldiers to unite and join Germany in overthrowing the British in India, continuing the struggle for Indian independence supposedly begun in 1857 when Hindu and Muslim sepoys (soldiers) mutinied. It is doubtful whether this

kind of appeal would have had much traction with the majority of Sikh prisoners since their soldiers had been among the most loyal in putting the rebellion down.

As Germans became more familiar with Indian troops through fighting against them and taking them prisoner, they came to admire and respect their fighting spirit. Whereas at the start of the war Indian soldiers were crudely depicted as blood-thirsty savages in German propaganda, this gave way to acknowledgement of their fighting prowess and (to the Germans) their surprising mercy towards the German wounded (although press depictions of Sikh soldiers as blood-thirsty savages continued). German soldiers were issued with guidance on Indian customs and armed with Urdu phrases to encourage them to surrender.

At the Half Moon Camp in 1916, a German anthropologist, Egon von Eickstedt, organised a programme of racial profiling of 76 Sikh prisoners. Their bodies were carefully measured and facial

features, such as the length of their noses and eye colour, were recorded. They had their strength tested through nail biting and hand gripping. Family details and even tattoos were noted. Some were accurately drawn by a German artist while others were photographed. This research was eventually published after the war in a thesis called 'The Racial Elements of the Sikhs'.

In a separate study undertaken by the Royal Prussian Phonographic Commission, the voices of some of these Sikh prisoners were recorded talking in their mother tongue about aspects of their lives, war-time experiences, beliefs and customs. These recordings were officially archived by the German state.

Encounters with the "martial races" of the British and French colonial empires did not undermine the conviction that most Germans shared with other white people, namely that Europeans remained racially superior. In fact the kind of

racial profiling undertaken at Wunsdorf laid the foundations for later Nazi methodology.

It is ironic, however, that the Germans were justified in their concern that bringing non-white colonial troops to fight in Europe would undermine European imperialism in general. Certainly, Sikh soldiers left Europe with more awareness of their lack of rights, an admiration for the education provided to European women and a growing distrust of British methods and motives in India.