

India and WWI: balancing demands of war with defence of Empire

*During WWI, India found itself in the unusual position of being low on the British Empire's list of concerns. **Adam Prime** explores the competing priorities of the British in the Great War, highlighting that while Kitchener was keen to divert troops from India to Europe, the colonial leadership feared that losing the British military presence would lead to the collapse of the Raj.*

This post forms part of a series on India and World War I. Click [here](#) to view more posts.



On 26 September 1914 the first regiments of Indian Expeditionary Force A landed at Marseille. This amalgamation of Indian and British units soon joined the fighting at the First Battle of Ypres (19 October- 22 November 1914). Six further expeditionary forces later saw action in various theatres of the First World War while India found itself in the unusual position of being low on the British Empire's list of concerns.



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In contrast, the majority of the nineteenth century had seen British military strategy firmly focused on defending, and indeed expanding, the Indian Empire. The North-West Frontier of India was the chief among the British authorities' defensive concerns: tribal uprisings in this area were a frequent problem and the threat of Afghan invasion or Russian invasion through Afghanistan had also always loomed large. An added concern for soldiers and politicians alike was the threat from within India; in the form of rising nationalist sentiment and the constant trepidation over the loyalty of soldiers dating back to the rebellion of 1857. The private correspondence between Earl Kitchener of Khartoum and General Sir Beauchamp Duff, for example, shows how these concerns had to be weighed up against the growing burden of the First World War.

Kitchener, British Secretary of State for War in 1914, had been Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army between 1902 and 1909; in this position he presided over a number of modernising reforms. One man who benefitted from Kitchener's presence there was Beauchamp Duff, who served as Adjutant General and Chief of the General Staff under Kitchener. By 1914 Duff had risen to the same role Kitchener had once occupied, Commander-in-Chief. Initially, Kitchener's requests from August 1914 concerned officers. Officer casualties were high during the

early months of the First World War; junior officers in particular were at a premium. Duff could meet some but not all of Kitchener's demands. By 17 September however, the need had moved from officers to whole units. Kitchener now considered moving all British units from India to Europe.

For Duff this was unacceptable. Like all officers of the Indian Army, the Commander-in-Chief was not entirely trusting of native loyalty – a hangover from 1857. Kitchener offered to replace the British and Indian units earmarked for Europe with inexperienced Territorial battalions who he said were incapable of facing the Germans. The British regular battalions stationed in India were experienced in frontier warfare whereas Territorial battalions had neither the experience nor training for frontier service. Both Duff and Viceroy of India, Lord Hardinge, objected to this and eventually eight regular British Army battalions were left in India. Understandably, the Commander-in-Chief and Viceroy were anxious to keep a British presence in India. Duff wrote *'if large bodies of troops were removed from the frontier just now even if they were replaced by others it must give Afghanistan and the tribes an impression of weakness.'*

Kitchener was dissatisfied with Duff and Hardinge's lack of co-operation over the moving of British battalions. Kitchener railed that Hardinge did not realise the seriousness of the situation in Europe on 19 September. On 24 September he again complained about the lack of understanding in India, this time in the most dramatic terms: *'If we lose, it will be worse for India than any success of internal revolution or frontier attack, for there will be no one to reconquer India after it is over, so it will be better for India to see that we win'*. This statement led Duff to acknowledge Kitchener's crisis and state he was willing to risk Indian security more plainly saying: *'India's safety may have to be disregarded and reconquered afterwards'*. Duff subsequently allowed additional artillery and ordinance to be moved to Europe despite his misgivings and loyalty led him to readily accept Kitchener's version of events.

These private telegrams show that Duff was keen to appease nationalist sentiment in India and maintain the appearance of British superiority in South Asia. Early on in the dialogue Duff informs Kitchener that to use Indian troops largely for garrison duty in other parts of the Empire in order to free up British units for the Western Front would not sit well in India as it would be taken as a slight toward Indian soldiers. Later in January 1915 Duff again showed political awareness when he suggested that units such as 125th Bhopal Rifles or 2/8th Gurkhas should not be sent straight back to India in a mauled state as it would affect Indian morale. Duff suggested instead that such units should recuperate in Egypt. This would be reiterated by Duff on 2 June 1915 when he said:

'Politically the effect in India of the return of regiments depleted by war from the field of action before we have won some definite success or before the campaign is over is much to be deprecated, it will be taken to mean the British have been defeated...agitators stories that regiments have been sent to Europe to be destroyed will be widely be believed, immense impulse will be given to the preaching of a jihad in Afghanistan, among the North-West Frontier tribesmen and in India itself.'

The German and Ottoman governments had sent out political missions to coerce Muslim states such as Afghanistan and the frontier tribes into declaring war on British India; further stretching British Imperial resources. There was a need to keep up an illusion of success in India to avoid giving the impression of war weariness. This was a legitimate concern: in 1919 the Afghan Amir invaded India (albeit unsuccessfully), aiming to take advantage of British war exhaustion.

There were a significant number of tribal uprisings on the North-West Frontier during the First World War. Each of these was quashed by British and Indian soldiers. Had Kitchener gotten his way in 1914 however, there may not have been any troops in India to suppress these rebellions. It is to Duff's credit that he stood up to Kitchener enough to keep a reasonable force in India but was also accommodating enough to see as many troops as possible were released to face Britain's enemies.

About the Author

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