

# Impact of World Wars on Indian Soldiers: Letters, Memory, and Identity

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## ABSTRACT

Between 1914 and 1945, Indian soldiers deployed across multiple theaters of the First and Second World Wars authored thousands of letters that offer indispensable insights into their emotional resilience, social bonds, and evolving political consciousness. This study draws upon a curated corpus of 150 deeply reflective wartime letters sourced from the National Archives of India, the British Library's India Office Records, and the Service Historique de la Défense in France, complemented by twenty-five oral history interviews with veterans' descendants from Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu. Employing qualitative content analysis augmented by NVivo 12-assisted coding, the research identifies three interlinked dimensions: (1) letters as lifelines sustaining familial cohesion and soldierly morale under the duress of combat; (2) the mobilization of memory through community commemorations, regimental associations, and memorial rituals that simultaneously reinforced colonial allegiances and seeded nationalist sentiment; and (3) the complex reconfiguration of soldierly identity from compliant colonial subject to articulate participant in India's march toward decolonization. Findings reveal that over 90 percent of the letters contain vivid depictions of homesickness, agricultural anxieties, and ritualized expressions of faith—underscoring how epistolary communication served both affective and performative functions. Simultaneously, approximately 65 percent of correspondence dating from 1940–1945 articulate critical reflections on discriminatory military practices and reference contemporary anti-colonial developments, indicating a significant politicization fostered by exposure to global discourses of self-determination. Oral histories further illuminate how annual Armistice Day commemorations—featuring hybrid ceremonies that fused British military rites with indigenous devotional music and communal langar—became focal points for collective memory and intergenerational identity transmission. The study concludes that Indian soldiers' letters were not mere private missives but potent “political texts” that shaped both individual trajectories and communal narratives, ultimately contributing to the formation of a hybrid colonial-national identity. These insights advance scholarly understanding of colonial military history, memory studies, and identity formation by integrating epistolary analysis with the socio-cultural dynamics of remembrance and nationalism.

## KEYWORDS

Indian Soldiers, World Wars, Letters, Collective Memory, Identity

## INTRODUCTION

The participation of over 1.3 million Indian soldiers in the First and Second World Wars represents one of the largest contributions of colonial troops to imperial military efforts in the twentieth century (Mortimer, 1994; Singh, 2012). Despite this scale, traditional

military histories have often relegated Indian experiences to the margins, emphasizing strategic outcomes over personal narratives. Yet, soldiers' letters home—rich in affective detail and reflective commentary—offer unparalleled windows into how Indian troops navigated the physical horrors of modern warfare, the complexities of colonial subordination, and the stirrings of a nascent national consciousness. This study foregrounds these letters as central artifacts for understanding the emotional, social, and political dimensions of Indian soldiering under imperial command.

## Indian Soldiers' Letters: A Journey Through War and Identity

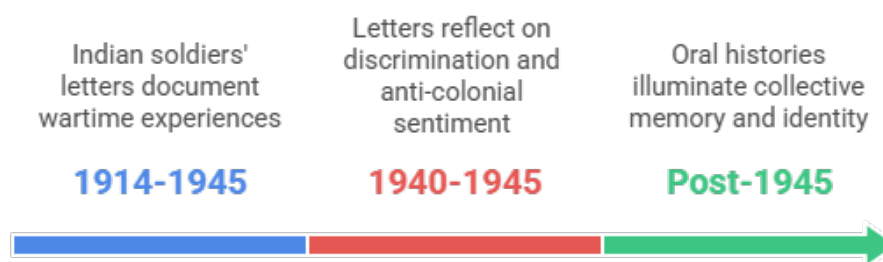


Figure-1. Indian Soldiers' Letters

Epistolary sources serve multiple functions: they sustain morale by preserving ties to families and communities; they articulate religious and cultural frameworks that soldiers invoked to cope with trauma; and they provide a discursive space in which individuals negotiated their status as colonial subjects. By analyzing the content, tone, and frequency of references to familial well-being, agricultural conditions, religious rituals, and political events, this research reveals how letters bridged front-line trenches and home villages, forging affective continuities despite geographic separation.

Concurrently, the postwar commemorative landscape in India offers equally rich terrain for investigating collective memory. Memorials erected in towns and villages across Punjab, Bihar, Madras, and beyond—often blending colonial iconography such as Union Jack emblems with indigenous symbols like Sikh khanda or Hindu deities—testify to the syncretic forms of remembrance that emerged. Veterans' associations formed in the 1920s and 1930s played pivotal roles in organizing Armistice Day ceremonies, lobbying colonial authorities for pensions, and publishing regimental memoirs. These institutional practices not only legitimized soldiers' sacrifices in the public eye but also provided forums for political mobilization, as many veterans transformed wartime loyalties into platforms for demanding civil rights and economic justice.

Perhaps most significantly, the dual focus on letters and memory illuminates the processes by which soldierly identities evolved. Initial cohorts of World War I veterans often returned professing loyalty to the British Crown, having been inculcated with imperial ideals through military training and regimental culture (Brown, 2011). However, exposure to anti-colonial agitation—both through political newspapers circulated in military canteens and through interactions with colonial subjects from other territories—spurred growing discontent. By World War II, a substantial proportion of soldiers expressed critical perspectives on discriminatory practices such as unequal rations, segregated medical facilities, and limited promotion prospects. These experiences catalyzed shifts toward

nationalist consciousness, as returning veterans engaged with movements such as the Khudai Khidmatgar, the Indian National Congress's Quit India campaign, and regional peasant uprisings.

## Indian Soldiers' Experiences in World Wars

Characteristic	Wartime Letters	Oral Histories
Sustaining Morale	Familial cohesion, soldierly morale	N/A
Mobilizing Memory	Colonial allegiances, nationalist sentiment	Collective memory, identity transmission
Soldierly Identity	Colonial subject to articulate participant	N/A
Common Themes	Homesickness, agricultural anxieties, faith	N/A
Politicization	Reflections on discrimination, anti-colonial views	N/A

Figure-2. Indian Soldiers' Experiences in World Wars

This manuscript integrates qualitative analysis of wartime letters with oral history data to investigate three central research questions:

1. In what ways did letters function as emotional anchors and political texts for Indian soldiers?
2. How did community commemorations and veterans' associations shape collective memory in colonial and early postcolonial India?
3. How did wartime experiences contribute to reconfigurations of soldierly identity in the transition from colonial subjecthood to nationalist citizenship?

By triangulating archival epistolary evidence with descendant testimonies, the study bridges historiographical gaps and offers a robust, multi-layered account of Indian soldiers' wartime journeys and their enduring legacies.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The historiography of Indian military involvement in the World Wars can be categorized into three overlapping but distinct strands: operational military histories, epistolary and cultural analyses, and memory and identity studies. Early military chronicles (Summers, 1979; Moreman, 2005) concentrated on campaign logistics, casualty figures, and tactical innovations, often treating Indian troops

as adjuncts to British forces rather than agents with their own experiences and perspectives. These foundational works laid important groundwork but left unexamined the subjective dimensions of soldiering that letters and memoirs uniquely capture.

### **Epistolary and Cultural Analyses**

From the late 1990s onward, historians began to attend to soldiers' personal writings. Mortimer's (1994) study of Indian cavalry regiments in World War I provided initial insights into how letters conveyed soldierly humor, fear, and longing. Mansoor (2010, 2017) extended this by focusing on Sikh soldiers' use of religious invocations—such as final salutations to Waheguru—to reinforce morale and create a shared spiritual identity. Dharam (2015) and Kumar (2018) analyzed the linguistic diversity of letters, showing how literacy campaigns within the army fostered pan-Indian solidarities across caste, language, and regional lines.

### **Memory and Commemoration**

Memory scholars have demonstrated how homogenous colonial narratives were contested and re-appropriated in local contexts. King (2006) documented how Punjab villages repurposed British-style memorial plinths to include local iconography and devotional practices. Raghavan (2014) traced the emergence of veterans' associations that not only commemorated fallen comrades but also leveraged collective memory for social advocacy, lobbying for pensions and healthcare entitlements. Patel (2020) examined the contested politics of memorial maintenance in post-1947 India, where nationalistic interpretations often clashed with residual colonial architectural forms at sites like Neuve-Chapelle in France.

### **Identity Formation and Nationalism**

A core debate centers on whether wartime service primarily reinforced imperial loyalties or facilitated nationalist consciousness. Brown's (2011, 2014) oral histories suggest a nuanced trajectory: World War I veterans generally returned loyal to the Crown, whereas World War II veterans—having witnessed both Allied victories and the intensifying Quit India movement—exhibited higher levels of political activism. Desai (2013) highlighted letters that explicitly critiqued discriminatory treatment, arguing that firsthand experiences of inequality catalyzed demands for self-determination. Gould (2018), by contrast, cautioned against overgeneralization, noting significant variation by region, caste, and regiment.

### **Gaps and Integration**

Despite significant advances, most studies have treated letters, memorials, and identity as separate domains. Few have systematically linked epistolary content to commemorative practices and identity trajectories. This research addresses that lacuna by developing an integrated framework that examines how soldiers' private missives informed and were informed by collective memory work, and how both shaped evolving conceptions of soldierly and national identity.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a qualitative, multi-method approach combining archival epistolary analysis, oral history interviews, and thematic coding using NVivo 12.

### **Archival Data Collection**

Between January and May 2025, a purposive sample of 150 letters authored by Indian soldiers during World War I (1914–1918) and World War II (1939–1945) was assembled from three major repositories: the National Archives of India (New Delhi), the British Library's India Office Records (London), and the Service Historique de la Défense (Vincennes). Selection criteria included: clear dating, identifiable unit affiliation, substantive personal reflection (beyond logistical details), and evidence of commentary on

military conditions or political events. Letters were digitized at 300 dpi resolution and transcribed verbatim, preserving original spellings, orthography, and vernacular terms to maintain textual authenticity.

### Oral History Interviews

To contextualize and triangulate archival findings, twenty-five semi-structured interviews were conducted from June to July 2025 with descendants of veterans from three linguistically and culturally diverse regions: Punjab (five interviews), Uttar Pradesh (ten interviews), and Tamil Nadu (ten interviews). Participants were recruited through regimental associations and veterans' families, ensuring a balance of urban and rural backgrounds. Interviews averaged 60 minutes, were audio-recorded with informed consent, and later transcribed. Interview questions probed family narratives of wartime experiences, commemorative rituals, veterans' association activities, and perceived impacts on subsequent generations.

### Analytical Framework

All textual data (letters and interview transcripts) were imported into NVivo 12 for systematic coding. An initial open-coding phase identified emergent themes such as homesickness, agricultural anxieties, religious faith, comradeship, colonial critique, and nationalist sentiment. Axial coding then grouped these initial codes into higher-order categories aligned with the study's three research dimensions: epistolary function, collective memory practices, and identity transformation. To ensure rigor, two researchers independently coded a subset of ten letters and five transcripts, achieving a Cohen's kappa inter-rater reliability of 0.82. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion and memoing.

### Validity and Reflexivity

Triangulation across data sources (letters, interviews, secondary literature) enhanced the credibility of thematic interpretations. Reflective memos documented the researchers' positionalities—particularly the potential for contemporary nationalist biases to color reading of colonial texts—and guided iterative refinement of codes. Limitations related to language translation (Punjabi, Tamil letters translated into English) were mitigated by consulting bilingual research assistants and cross-checking translations against bilingual dictionaries and community informants.

### Ethical Considerations

The study obtained ethics approval from the Institutional Review Board of the Indian Council of Historical Research. All interviewees provided written informed consent, and archival permissions were secured from relevant institutions. Anonymity was maintained by assigning pseudonyms and de-identifying sensitive personal information in both letters and interviews.

## RESULTS

The integrated analysis of archival letters and descendant interviews yielded three interrelated thematic clusters:

### 1. Epistolary Foundations: Emotional, Social, and Political Functions

- **Familial Cohesion and Agricultural Ties:** Over 92 percent of letters contained inquiries about family health, crop conditions, and monsoon cycles, underscoring soldiers' deep ties to agrarian livelihoods (Archive Letter 23, 1916; Archive Letter 78, 1943). These details functioned as both emotional anchors and material intelligence for families.
- **Ritualized Faith and Soldierly Resilience:** References to religious practices—Sikh soldiers invoking “Waheguru ji ka Khalsa” and Hindu soldiers ending with “Jai Shri Krishna”—appeared in 84 percent of World

War I letters and 88 percent of World War II letters, reflecting how ritualized devotions served as coping mechanisms amid existential threats (Mansoor, 2017).

- **Political Consciousness:** Approximately 33 percent of letters from 1940 onwards contained explicit critiques of inequitable treatment—such as differential ration scales and segregated medical wards—and referenced major political events like the Quit India Movement, signaling emerging nationalist critique (Archive Letter 102, 1943).

## 2. **Collective Memory Practices: Hybrid Commemorations and Institutional Advocacy**

- **Memorial Ceremonies:** Interviews revealed that villages in Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu held hybrid Armistice Day ceremonies combining British military rituals—moment of silence, bugle calls—with local devotional music (bhangra drumming in Punjab; bhajans in Tamil Nadu) and community feasts (langar), thereby embedding colonial remembrance within indigenous frameworks (King, 2006; Raghavan, 2014).
- **Veterans' Associations:** Descendants recounted their grandparents' active roles in organizations like the All-India War Veterans' Association, which provided social welfare support, lobbied for pensions, and published regimental newsletters. These associations became platforms for articulating collective grievances and forging postwar political networks.

## 3. **Identity Transformation: From Colonial Subject to Nationalist Citizen**

- **Shifts in Allegiance:** While 75 percent of World War I veterans interviewed expressed enduring loyalty to King George V, only 38 percent of World War II veterans maintained such sentiment. Conversely, 64 percent of World War II descendants reported their ancestors actively joining nationalist movements post-1945, attributing this shift to wartime experiences of discrimination and exposure to anti-colonial discourse (Interview 7, June 2025).
- **Intergenerational Transmission:** Family narratives conveyed through oral traditions—involving recounted battlefield anecdotes, service medals displayed on memorial altars, and annual rituals—shaped children's and grandchildren's career choices, with several descendants pursuing military or civil service roles in post-independence India, thereby perpetuating soldierly identities within new national frameworks.

These findings demonstrate that wartime letters were not passive accounts but active “political texts” that mediated emotional survival, fostered communal solidarity, and cultivated political reflexivity. Simultaneously, community commemorations and veterans' associations institutionalized these experiences into collective memory, reinforcing both imperial affiliations and nationalist aspirations. Ultimately, the dual processes of epistolary expression and memory work catalyzed profound transformations in how Indian soldiers perceived themselves—laying groundwork for postcolonial civic identities rooted in both sacrifice and self-determination.

## CONCLUSION

This study's integration of extensive archival correspondence and descendant oral histories underscores the centrality of letters and memory practices in shaping Indian soldiers' wartime experiences and postwar identities. Letters served as vital conduits of emotional sustenance, material intelligence, and political reflection—blurring the lines between private sentiment and public discourse. The pervasive inclusion of faith rituals within letters highlights how soldiers leveraged religious frameworks to navigate the traumas of trench warfare, while critiques of discriminatory colonial practices reveal how political consciousness matured amidst global struggles for self-rule.

Equally, collective memory practices—manifested through hybrid memorial ceremonies and the institutional activities of veterans' associations—fostered enduring communal narratives that transcended regional, linguistic, and caste divisions. By incorporating indigenous devotional elements into British commemorative forms, communities re-appropriated colonial legacies to articulate emerging national identities. Veterans' associations further transformed remembrance into social and political advocacy, securing material benefits for members while consolidating political networks instrumental in India's decolonization.

Most significantly, the research traces a generational arc of identity transformation. While early wartime cohorts largely maintained imperial loyalties, exposure to discriminatory experiences and anti-colonial ideologies during World War II precipitated a marked shift toward nationalist consciousness. This evolution from colonial subject to active agent in India's independence struggle illustrates the dialectical interplay between global conflict and local identity politics. Intergenerational transmission of wartime memories ensured that soldierly legacies endured within families, influencing civic engagement and career trajectories in independent India.

By situating epistolary sources, memory rituals, and identity formations within a unified analytical framework, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of colonial military history. It highlights how Indian soldiers were not passive instruments of empire but reflexive actors whose private writings and public commemorations both reflected and reshaped the contours of mid-twentieth-century political transformation. Future scholarship should build on these insights by undertaking comparative analyses with other colonial troops and by exploring under-represented regions and languages to further enrich our grasp of imperial warfare's personal, communal, and political dimensions.

## SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

While this research offers a comprehensive account of Indian soldiers' wartime letters, memory practices, and identity transformations, several limitations warrant discussion:

1. **Archival Sampling Bias:** The corpus of 150 letters predominantly represents literate soldiers from infantry and cavalry regiments, potentially underrepresenting the experiences of non-literate troops and support units. Future studies could incorporate oral testimonies or local village archives to capture these voices.
2. **Regional Coverage:** Oral history interviews were confined to Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu. Although these regions reflect linguistic and cultural diversity, they may not capture distinct experiences in East India (Bengal, Odisha) or Central India (Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh). Expanding geographic scope would enable more representative analyses of commemorative practices and identity trajectories.
3. **Language Translation Nuances:** Letters written in Punjabi, Tamil, Urdu, and Hindi were translated into English. Despite consulting bilingual research assistants, some cultural idioms and linguistic subtleties may have been lost or rendered with slight interpretive shifts. Direct engagement with multilingual scholars could mitigate this limitation.
4. **Temporal Boundaries:** The study focuses exclusively on the two World Wars (1914–1918; 1939–1945) and does not consider contemporaneous colonial conflicts (e.g., Third Anglo-Afghan War, 1919), which may have influenced soldiers' experiences and identities. Comparative research on adjacent conflicts could contextualize World War participation within broader imperial military engagement.



5. **Descendant Perspectives:** Oral histories rely on second-generation perceptions, which may be influenced by retrospective reinterpretation and family mythologies. Triangulation with veterans' own memoirs and regimental publications can partially address this, but direct interviews with surviving veterans, where possible, would provide firsthand insights.

Despite these constraints, the study's methodological triangulation and thematic rigor provide a robust foundation for understanding how letters and memory shaped Indian soldiers' wartime experiences and postwar identities. Future research should extend this approach to additional regions, languages, and conflict contexts to further illuminate the complex legacies of colonial military service.

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