



## CONNECTED HISTORIES: MUSLIMS IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR



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**Introduction to:**

# ***Connected Histories: Muslims in the First World War***

**This HLF-funded project highlights the contributions of Muslims to the British war effort.**

The 100-year commemorations of the First World War, which began in 2014, indicated that little was known about the contribution of Muslim people. Yet, Muslim involvement in the British war effort is a big story. The British Indian Army totalled 1.4 million troops, in which 430,000 Muslims served alongside more than 800,000 Hindus and 100,000 Sikhs, with Christians and others. It involved people from India and areas that later became Pakistan and Bangladesh, as well as Arab and African countries.

We cannot tell that whole story here; this guide presents some of the facts, events and stories about the Muslims that served, in order to shed light on their extensive contributions in the War. It also highlights the connection between Birmingham and Britain's contemporary Muslim communities and the historic sacrifices of their ancestors.

We hope this project helps increase awareness of the significant Muslim contribution to the British war effort and how the First World War accelerated migration and cultural diversity in Birmingham and Britain. We also hope to point to the challenges in documenting and recovering this history.

The project has been delivered by Xtra Mile West Midlands CIC in partnership with Birmingham Museums Trust, University of Birmingham, Library of Birmingham, and Future Seed CIC.

**[www.connected-histories.org](http://www.connected-histories.org)**

The story of:

# MUSLIMS IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The First World War lasted from 1914 until 1918. It was initially between the Allies (Britain, France, and Russia) and the Central Powers (Germany and Austria-Hungary). These countries were later joined by the United States, Italy and Japan (supporting the Allies) and Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire (joining the Central Powers).

During this time, several European nations had vast empires, and the people of these faraway lands were drawn upon to assist in those war efforts. Britain called for assistance from the Caribbean, Africa, Australasia, Canada, and India. India supplied 1.4 million troops. 430,000 Muslim soldiers were recruited from the Punjab, Bengal, and Kashmir (including present-day Pakistan). Some villages saw a high proportion of their men join the British Indian Army. Muslims (from Bangladesh, Yemen and Somaliland) also served in significant numbers in the British Merchant Navy.

About 885,000 Muslims supported the whole Allied war effort, serving in places like Africa (North and East), the Middle East (Mesopotamia), the Mediterranean and Europe. Nearly 75,000 soldiers from the British Indian Army were killed in action. Some, who were injured in Europe, were treated in Britain.

Involvement in the First World War changed the lives of Muslims in many ways. Some were awarded certain privileges, including land rights in areas like the Punjab and Kashmir, or titles and roles of responsibility in their local areas. Both the First and Second World War accelerated migration. Many millions fled as refugees, but those who served could travel in ways otherwise impossible. Many Muslims serving in the British Indian Army and Merchant Navy, like their Sikh and Hindu comrades, were granted the right to settle in Britain.

**Did you know that many of the Muslim soldiers who served were given special vouchers to settle in Britain?**

The stories of:

## **DESCENDANTS OF MUSLIMS WHO SERVED**

Today, descendants of Muslims who served in the First World War reside in Birmingham. Until recently, little was known about their ancestors, as very little has publicly survived, in terms of memories (stories) and physical material (artefacts and documents). The project set out to engage local Muslim communities to find existing stories and materials for further research.

The project tries to tell the story of Muslims who served in the War, by thinking about the connection between the big picture and the individual stories. Understandably, we could not capture and tell every story. Instead, the exhibition provides broad brushstrokes to build an idea of the War, into which the stories of descendants could be added, linking present-day British Muslim communities with an iconic part of British history. These stories are important. They can help us to think about how local, national and international communities have been shaped.

The project interviewed a range of people. While the interviews were all unique, there were some key questions and themes that remained the same throughout:

**What do you know about your ancestors and their involvement in the First World War?**

**How do you feel about this heritage and history?**

**What might be the value of this history and contribution to British history?**

The story of:

## SUBADAR FIROZ KHAN 82ND PUNJABIS

Two members of Yasmin's family lost their lives in the world wars. Her great-grandfather, Firoz Khan, died on 6 February 1917 and is remembered with honour on the Basra Memorial. He is presumed to have no grave.

"My great-grandfather was quite young when he signed up. He didn't have any parents, he was living with family, so he signed up to the army. He then got married, and it was soon after his marriage, that he actually was killed. He died in battle. Mum had thought for so many years that it was Burma. He may have been deployed in Burma at some point, I don't know, but he lost his life in Iraq. And I think my grandfather (Bashir Khan) who was his only child, was three at the time".

We learn again how successive generations within families had come to serve in the British Indian Army:

"So, when my grandfather was three, he lost his father. And then he, at a very early age, joined up with the army as well. He lost his life when he was seventeen. He died in the Battle of Cassino, a famous battle in Italy. I think my mum was just a few months old, so she didn't get to see her father. So, my grandfather didn't see his dad, but knew of him, and the same thing happened to my mum".

Bashir Khan died on 24 March 1944 and is remembered with honour at the Sangro River War Cemetery, where he has a marked grave.



Sepoy Bashir Khan (son of Firoz Khan)  
12th Frontier Force Regiment, stood to left.  
Photo courtesy of the family.

**“ MY MOTHER  
OFTEN REMEMBERS  
HIM, AND I REMEMBER  
MY GRANDMOTHER  
REMEMBERING  
HIM... ”**



The story of:

## MOHAMMED SHABAN PUNJAB RIFLES

Assed's great-uncle, Mohammed Shaban, joined the British Indian Army while very young. He was deployed to Tanzania where he was killed. He died without children. His story is left for the wider family to try to remember and to tell.

"I was in Pakistan and I remember my grandmother, at the time saying, your such and such died in Africa. I was just like, what, how does that even make sense? What was he doing in Africa? From this little village in Kashmir. I found out that Mohammed Shaban, my great-uncle, left the village and went and fought in World War One and died in Tanzania. I contacted Jahan, who's a historian, and he looked it up in the archives. He found out that he was from the Punjab Rifles".

"It was a charge, and he was in a machine gun position and a British officer had said this is what you have to do and it was a massacre actually. These young lads, going to fight, in another part of the world, and lost their lives for the British Empire".

"I'm not sure how they found out. The problem is, all the old generation have passed away. So it's just my dad and his brothers and sisters left. And they don't know much".

In these stories of Muslim contributions, you not only pick up a powerful sense of pride, but also strong opinions and feelings about the nature of those sacrifices.

How many lost their lives  
who are forgotten today?



“ SO I START  
ASKING QUESTIONS  
ABOUT MY FAMILY  
AND WHERE WE  
CAME FROM.  
WE HAVE A  
ROUGH IDEA... ”

Indian troops embarking for Kilwa, Tanzania, October 1917. Image © IWM (Q 015679)

The story of:

## RISALDAR RAJA FEROZE KHAN KASHMIRI LANCERS

Feroze Khan was a captain in the Kashmiri Lancers, in the British Indian Army. During the First World War, he fought in Mesopotamia. His great-grandson lives in Birmingham today.

“At the age of 21, I went back to Kashmir and met my grandfather for the very first time. He relayed the story of my great-grandfather, Feroze Khan, being injured. He didn’t go into it in any great detail, exactly how he was injured, all he recalls is that he returned from war. He had fought with the British Indian Army. He was on horseback, I believe he was a captain, known as Risaldar (commander of a mounted troop) in the Kashmiri Lancers. So, he was a captain there, and he was injured, and he was honourably discharged from battle. That was what the certificate also relayed. Sadly, we didn’t have very long together because he died within about a week after I was there”.

“Now, he remembered very little, because he was about 14 or 15, when his father returned from the Great War due to an injury that he had sustained during this battle, and he passed away within about a year after returning”.

On exploring the story further, we discover that Feroze Khan also served in the British Indian Army during the Boer War in South Africa (1899-1902). On discharge from the First World War, he was appointed Zaildaar; a semi-hereditary role administering 20 to 40 villages in Kashmir.



Certificate of Honorary Discharge for Risaldar Feroze Khan, courtesy of Rashid.

“ **THERE’S LOTS  
OF PEOPLE WHO HAVE  
MEMORIES  
AND COLLECTIONS.  
BUT, IT’S FADING.** ”

The story of:

## MOHAMMED RASHID SHAIKH

### URDU TEACHER

Naeem's grandfather was born in Karachi and grew up there. He was very well educated and spoke English perfectly. He was in the British Indian Army teaching English officers Urdu.

Joining Britain's war effort was complex and not seen by all colonial subjects as just or appropriate, when they were not free men themselves. For others, it was being called to fight people of their own faith.

"The British Army was actually fighting the Turkish empire. There was a lot of resentment among the soldiers, having to fight against people of their own faith. My grandfather was religious as well, but he was quite modern. He didn't want to do that. From what I hear, he resigned his commission and could have been punished by death. But, because he was involved in teaching officers, they were very friendly with him".

Like others, Naeem had more than one ancestor in the British Indian Army:

"There was a great-uncle, Malik Karam Dad Awan, in the First World War who came all the way to France to fight. My father actually joined the British Indian Army as well, he was part of the occupation forces in Japan. I think he would have joined the army because he had no other option in terms of earning a livelihood. Some try to make out that people were joining the army because they had this vision, that they had sympathy for the empire and they wanted to protect that empire and expand it. It wasn't that, it was actually being recruited on the basis that you will make a livelihood".



“ WITH FEW OPPORTUNITIES OF MAKING A LIVING, RECRUITMENT TO THE INDIAN ARMY WAS AN OPTION. ”

Indian troops escorting Turkish prisoners of war in Baghdad. Image courtesy of IWM (HU 104996)



The story of:

## NOOR HASSAN INJURED IN SERVICE

Liaqat's grandfather was badly injured in the First World War, losing a leg. Many returned with injuries, severely affecting their ability to earn a living and look after their families - the very thing they had been called to fight for.

"I was four or five years old, when my father, along with my grandmother, used to talk about my grandfather. My grandmother would talk about my grandfather as being a humble man, how he was such a good man. And, along with my grandfather, his brothers, they were in the war effort as well. So basically, we have a military history. Our grandparents, from my wife's side and from my family's side fought in the wars for Britain".

Liaqat highlights the extent of Muslim contribution in supporting Britain:

"Because it's not a little effort, it was a massive effort. People in their hundreds of thousands joined the army to fight for the British war effort. Not only in my family, greater family. They had not only served in Burma, they had served in the Sahara desert, they're the desert rats. There are even divisions that landed in Normandy. This is a fact. That a Muslim contribution, not only in the Burma Front, in the Middle East, in Scandinavian countries, in the European Front. Everywhere. Our people did well for this country, which we're very proud of".

Do you know how many wars your ancestors served in?



Wounded Indian Army soldiers in a French village, 31 October 1914.  
Image © IWM (Q 53348)

“ **THERE WAS A  
CALL BY THE  
LEADERSHIP,  
AT THAT TIME IN  
INDIA, TO FIGHT FOR  
THE BRITISH  
CAUSE.** ”

The story of:

## THE HAZARA PIONEERS MESOPOTAMIA

The British Indian Army was comprised of many different groups, religions, ethnicities, castes, and so on. One of those was the Hazara section of the Muslim population and the units that grew out of this group.

Three ancestors in Mohammed's family were in the Hazara Pioneers: his great-grandfather, Ali Juma; his great-uncle, Qwat Ali; and his wife's great-grandfather, Sepoy Ali Zafar.

"The Hazara were recruited by the British Indian Army under Raj at that time. And in 1904, a unit was specifically raised that was called the 106 Hazara Pioneers. Before that, they were recruited in the different units of the area, like 124 and 126 Baluchistan Regiment, and the Sikh Regiment, and some other cavalry units. They were all scattered until they raised the 106 Hazara Pioneers. They were all collected and put in one unit".

"My great-grandfather was one of the members of the 106 Hazara Pioneers and they received training as per Indian Army regulations. They got the same opportunity of the weaponry and the training. The thing which my father and my grandfather loved was the discipline. You see me now, there's a part of their training, of discipline, humanity".

"719 of them, the Hazara soldiers, were sent to Mesopotamia and my great-uncle was one of them. He worked there in Basra. They were involved in the train tracks. They had spent about two years there. And after the War in 1919, in early 1920, they returned back to the country".



**“ THEY MADE  
ROADS, BRIDGES...  
AND WHEN THEY  
WERE NEEDED,  
THEY WERE PUT  
IN THE FRONT  
AS WELL. ”**

Hazara Pioneers Hockey Team. Image courtesy of Mohammed Jafari Gulzari.

The story of:

## ZAMAN ALI KHAN AND SHAH-SAWER KHAN

Farooq tells of many relatives who fought in the First World War, including his great great-uncle, Zaman Ali Khan, his great-grandfather Shah-Sawer Khan, and his grandfather Yakub Khan.

“As a young man, my great great-uncle, Zaman Ali Khan, left the warm climate of British India, to travel thousands of miles, by land, by foot, physically, and then by sea, by boat. And then he arrived in the south of France and was there for almost approximately two years before he actually served in any physical contact with war. So, in foreign and alien conditions, the first time he’s ever left his family, to come to a climate, heavy rain, muddy trenches, cultural differences. The whole concept would have been alien to him, even dress wear, culture”.

And, of his great-grandfather, Shah-Sawer Khan:

“I have a picture of my great-grandfather with the commissioner, an Englishman, physically going to meet him to request his assistance. My great-grandfather’s reputation was highly regarded in this primary recruiting ground. And one of the things about this particular picture I’m very proud of is the fact that his son, who also served, is in that picture, with a Sikh guy. Even though we’re Muslims, the camaraderie and the connection with our fellow brethren, it’s there physically to be seen”.



Farooq says his great-grandfather “is sitting as an equal and would not tolerate being subservient at the height of colonialism”.

“ **WHAT HE DID  
FOR THE EMPIRE... I’M  
VERY, VERY PROUD,  
TO HAVE THAT KIND  
OF ANCESTRAL  
CONNECTION.** ”



The story of:

# RECRUITMENT POSTERS

The First World War drew in soldiers from all over the world. By the end of the War, the British Army had recruited over 4.5 million men from within Britain. But, this was not enough, millions more were recruited from her empire. How was this done?

Images courtesy of IWM



These posters show how the government encouraged so many to join the British war effort. The British poster uses the iconic image of Lord Kitchener (a senior British Army officer and colonial administrator). It was designed to appeal to young men, who felt it was their duty to stand against a threat to their country. The other two posters were created for the Indian subcontinent. The text is in Urdu. Translated, they read:

**Who is going to get the money, the gun and the uniform?  
The one who is going to enlist in the army.**

**This soldier is protecting Hindustan.  
The soldier is protecting his house and those who live in it.  
The best way to help your household is to enlist in the army.**

**Can you guess which quote goes with which poster?**

All three posters combine a sense of pride about one's country and a duty to protect it and its people. They also acknowledge the poverty that many ordinary people endured. Joining the army, in Britain or in India, was a chance of a wage, meals and comradeship. This combined effectively with a powerful sense of purpose.



The story of:

# FIRST WORLD WAR REPORTAGE

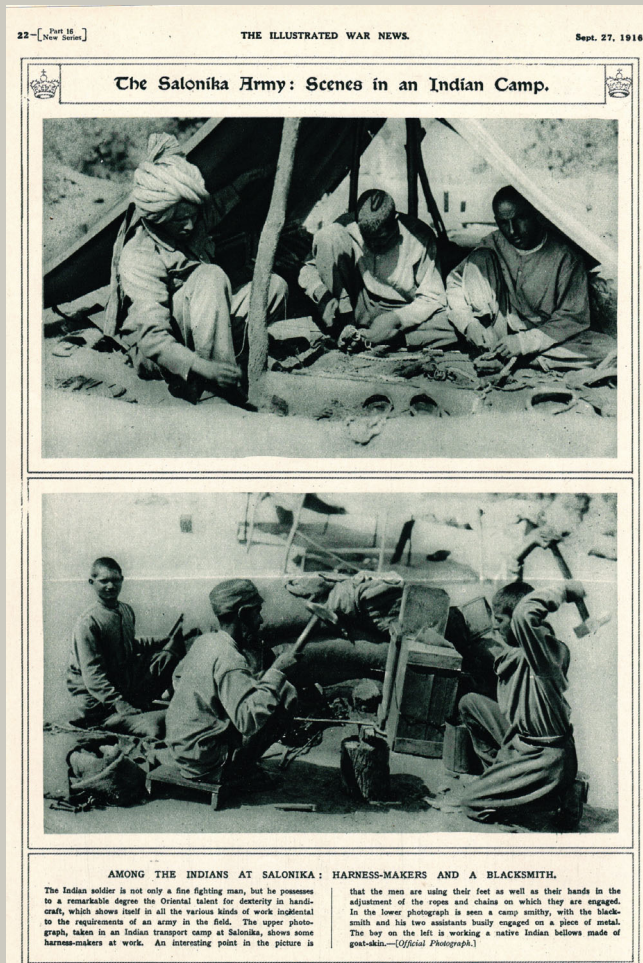
How is history about the First World War written? How is the War remembered? Until fairly recently, outside of interested historians and community activists, the history of the wider contributions of Britain's Empire in the First World War was under-explored.

Looking at the numbers of the British Indian Army contribution, we know that people of Muslim or South Asian heritage played a significant part. But the nature and extent of that participation and sacrifice is not common knowledge. It is not part of everyday depictions of the First World War or even the Second World War. Indeed, we rarely see Asian, Muslim or Black faces in war films.

How does the choice of images shape your view?

*The Illustrated War Times* was produced during the period of the War (1914-1918). Popular magazines, such as this, would be the source from which ordinary people might get their general information about the War. What they depict was important in forming public opinion and in developing popular knowledge.

Publications from different periods can offer quite contrasting views, as these stories are told under different circumstances and with particular aims, even biases. How do the older magazines compare with the ones published in this century?



The Salonika Campaign, featured in  
*The Illustrated War News*, September 1916.

“THERE'S A  
MASSIVE KNOWLEDGE  
GAP IN TERMS OF WHO  
SERVED, WHERE THEY  
SERVED, WHERE THEY  
DIED. WHY?”

The story of:

# ARTEFACTS FROM THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Whilst some 430,000 Muslims served in the British Indian Army in the First World War, it is difficult to find physical artefacts belonging to those people. It is even harder to find artefacts with known provenance - the history of an object, who it originally belonged to and the journey it has since taken.



Uniform of Farooq's grandfather, Yakub Khan, courtesy of Farooq and Jahan Mahmood. Photograph © Andrew Jackson.

Farooq is fortunate to have such rare artefacts of his own ancestors:

“I still have my grandfather's original uniform. British officers that have seen it, always respect it because of the great condition it is in. These kind of things, they mean a lot. We're losing these things, there is a connection, you know. And society needs to be enriched with these particular stories to raise the spirit of people, and humanity”.

Rashid also speaks of the surviving objects of his great-grandfather, Risaldar Raja Feroze Khan:

“The family kept his uniform, his wellingtons, they had his sword. They had kept those for many, many years, but they were gradually degrading. I remember seeing one wellington of his. And it was in a poor condition”.

Liaqat has a similar story relating to his grandfather, Noor Hassan:

“We also had a sword back home, from my grandfather, a military sword. Whether it's still there or not, I'll have to go back and look sometime. But, these are the war souvenirs that kids keep, as a family heritage, to commemorate and to remember your loved ones that have done so much, for mankind in general”.

“ **THERE SHOULD BE A MOBILE MUSEUM, TO DISPLAY THE OBJECTS, LIKE THE UNIFORM, THE MEDALS.** ”