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THE CONTRIBUTION OF INDIAN SOLDIERS IN WORLD WAR 1

SPEAKER: INDERPAL DHANJAL

Inderpal Dhanjal is a Sikh who speaks on behalf of “Legacy for Valour”, which seeks to set the record straight about the contribution that Indian soldiers, sailors and airmen have made to supporting British armed forces in various wars, especially the two World Wars, but also to the Boer War and the Afghan wars. Few members of the Society would have been aware of India’s contribution to these conflicts since it was never taught in school history lessons other than under the general topic of “Commonwealth Soldiers”. It is only in the last few years that any real research has been done on this topic.

On the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914, the British Government immediately appealed to their colonies for help. The response from India was both swift and positive. An Indian Expeditionary Force was assembled on 6th August and the first elements of this landed at Marseilles on the 24th. Thereafter, for the duration of the war, Indian forces were involved in Europe, East Africa, Suez, Gallipoli, Mesopotamia and south China. 1/6th of Allied Forces were Indian. The Sikhs, who formed only 2% of India’s population, accounted for 20% of the British Army. There were 1.5 million soldiers and half a million involved in support services such as doctors, nurses, medical surgeons, vets and technical staff, plus another 150,000 engineers, signallers, telegraph operators and mechanical engineers for army vehicles. In addition, India provided jute for sandbags and for processing into other items in the factories in Dundee, cotton for tent canvas, tea, coffee, sugar and other food supplies, medicines and stores, vehicles and locomotives and many other items that were essential for the war effort. The cost to the Indian exchequer was £850 million, in today’s money the equivalent of £85 billion. The human cost can be seen in the fact that there are 403 war cemeteries in 35 countries resulting from World War 1. For World War 2 there are 288 cemeteries in 50 countries. The social and economic impact on India itself was profound and the fact that Indians felt that their contribution to the war effort was never properly recognised helped fuel demands for first dominion status, then full independence.

A very informative and illuminating talk, which left many Society members with mixed feelings of guilt and humility and gratitude.