

The 1945 Burma Campaign and the Transformation of the British Indian Army. Raymond A. Callahan & Daniel Marston. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2020. ix + 280 pp. including: preface, 2 maps, 19 figures, endnotes, bibliography, and index. \$40. Hardcover ISBN: 9780700630417.

A War of Empires: Japan, India, Burma & Britain, 1941-45. Robert Lyman. Oxford: Osprey, 2021. 560 pp. including 11 maps, 28 figures, 4 appendices, endnotes, bibliography, and index. \$35. Hardcover ISBN: 9781472847140.

Fighting the Second World War in Burma continues to attract quality scholarship and these two books build on extensive work by three respected authors. They are also refreshing in having taken on broad themes when many academic publications tend towards a narrow focus.

Rather than stringently follow the normal construct this review considers how successful the authors were with their themes, and with the criterion for success provided sixty years ago by an author better known for writing fiction. John Masters was an Indian Army officer, a Chindit in 1944, and by 1945 a staff officer with 19th Indian Division. In the second part of his autobiography, *The Road Past Mandalay* (Michael Joseph, 1961) Masters wrote not only of his Indian Army's victory in Burma, he wrote also of his seeing a profound change in that army, and the nation from which it came:

This was the old Indian Army going down to the attack, for the last time in history.

Twenty races, a dozen religions, a score of languages passed in those trucks and tanks.

It was all summed up in the voice of an Indian colonel of artillery. The Indian army had not been allowed to possess any field artillery from the time of the Mutiny (1857) until just before the Second World War. Now the Indian, bending close to an English Colonel over a map, straightened and said with a smile, "OK George. Thanks. I've got it. We'll take over all tasks at 1800. What about a beer?" (311-313).

Could Callahan, Marston, and Lyman explain how Masters's pre-war Indian Army of some 200,000 which was selected from a deliberately limited number of ethnic and religious groups, was by 1945 an all-volunteer force of 2.5 million, drawn from groups previously considered as unsuitable material for soldiering? Could they explain how that army had risen above abject defeat and retreat from Burma in 1942, a debacle in Arakan in 1943, to win defensive battles at Kohima and Imphal in 1944, and by 1945 inflict on the Imperial Japanese Army the bloodiest defeat in its history? And, lest we forget it, this was an army of Indians, plus some British, but East and West Africans, too, whose three divisions and two independent brigades by 1945 outnumbered the British in Burma. Lyman records how that defeated army of 1942 retreated back to India where it was retrained and reinforced to successfully defend India in

1944 in the jungles of Arakan and the hills around Kohima and Imphal. Callahan and Marston build on that to cover a second transformation from 1944's jungle fighting force to a combined arms force, with an amphibious and air mobile capability, that fought and won a war of manoeuvre on the plains of Burma in 1945.

Lyman selected the frame of a war between empires and with it a longer timeframe, and that brings the challenge of examining what was Britain's longest continuous land campaign of the war. He ably describes how a moth-eaten British Empire, struggling to defend itself against Germany, quickly lost Burma in 1942, and how Burma was regained in 1945 by an Indian Army which had fought in 1944 to defend the India from which it came, and which, like Burma, would shortly move on to independence. As Lyman cogently observes, it was India that became the new owner of that piece of empire once controlled by Britain which Japan had failed to usurp.

At the heart of both books lies a single story of redemption, transformation, and victory. Lyman diligently describes the poverty of the colonial and military situation in Burma in 1941 and his superb account of the 1942 defeat and retreat is the best this reviewer has seen. Lyman also describes a poverty in military thinking within the Imperial Japanese Army of 1944/5 when it was comprehensively outfought and "out-generalled" and whose only response was to send its soldiers to the slaughter. Callahan and Marston describe in depth the transformative stage that made redemption possible by cleverly setting it against the 1945 campaign. All three recognise Bill Slim as the controlling mind who turned defeat into victory. Slim, a pre-war Indian Army officer, is now widely recognised as Britain's greatest Second World War general and his daring 1945 plan for a hammer and anvil campaign in northern and central Burma is clearly and engagingly described in both books. They also record how success was accompanied by subterfuge and deception to confuse and unbalance the enemy.

Callahan, Marston, and Lyman's description of the scale and pace of transformation almost defies belief. They start with the glacially slow pre-war process of "Indianisation" which by 1939 had delivered a mere 577 Indian Commissioned Officers, whose power to command British troops was as limited as their opportunity to progress. But by 1945 there were 15,000 of them serving alongside the Indian Army's 28,000 British, and even a few Polish officers, with whom they had equal authority, rights, and pay. Callahan and Marston describe how that took place while remaining firmly rooted in the context of the 1945 Burma campaign and contemporary politics.

Nor has Lyman been afraid to take a critical view of imperial politics, the Indian independence movement, and key players such as Churchill, Wavell, Mountbatten, Stilwell and others. He respects and describes Slim's ability to work, deliver, and survive within what was a snake pit of imperial politics and prejudices. With respect to Burma, all three authors discuss Churchill's prejudices, his unreasonable demands, his flights of fancy, his surprising lack of understanding of India, and his failure to understand the geographically remote locations of the fighting, which anyway he saw as justified only to assuage his American ally. Chapter 5 of *Transformation* offers an excellent synopsis of Slim's unexpected sacking in May 1945 and his almost instant reinstatement following a political attack by at least one jealous

superior. All three authors skilfully weave such political threads through their work and their books are richer for that.

The authors paint excellent pictures of the grim, unhealthy, inhospitable terrain, the terrible weather, impossible logistics, and an enemy who really did fight to the death. With hard-won air supremacy, the ground forces of 1944 and 1945 could rely on air supply where there were no roads, or when they were washed away, or when surrounded as at Meiktila in March 1945. Callahan and Marston highlight how dependent XIV Army was on air supply by 1945. In March each RAF and USAAF transport aircraft was flying 196 and 204 hours per month respectively. They also describe close air support for the 1945 battle to take Mandalay's Fort Dufferin, and impressively, the two air forces operating aircraft from Toungoo only four days after its capture.

Notable in both texts was the ability by 1945 of the Indian Army to form ad hoc mobile columns of tanks and infantry that encircled and reduced Japanese positions. The building of all round defensive boxes remained a nightly tactic retained from jungle fighting, but was combined with this new mobile flexibility, and artillery, to inflict disproportionately severe casualties on the Japanese. That new flexibility shows how much Slim's 1942 army, or that of Kohima and Imphal in mid-1944, had been transformed. By March 1945 Indian Officers were commanding battalions, were present at senior level in brigade and divisional staffs, and earlier British prejudices and doubts were all but overcome.

Callahan and Marston record that Slim's XIV Army did not stop fighting after victory in Burma. Chapter 6 offers a good overview of activity following the formal Japanese surrender in August 1945 – a fuller description can be found in Bayly & Harper's *Forgotten Wars – The End of Britain's Asian Empire* (London: Penguin, 2008). Now often forgotten, it was Slim who oversaw the re-occupation of territory still controlled by Japanese forces. Many Indian formations went directly from Burma in September 1945 to power vacuums in Siam, Malaya, Borneo, Singapore, and what is now Vietnam and Indonesia. The authors describe how once again, this new Indian Army showed its flexibility to transition into what we would today call peace-keeping or stabilisation duties despite there being an overall lack of political certainty and direction in former colonial territories. Actions against nationalist forces opposed to the return of the French and Dutch are described, most notably the fighting at Surabaya in present day Indonesia in late 1945. The final Indian Army units went home in November 1946, after remaining militarily professional and steadfast despite the community turmoil then underway in India. The challenges of that post-Burma period are evident in the Indian and few British units involved at Surabaya suffering more than a thousand killed, wounded and missing. In 1946 one of the first brigades to join the allied occupation force in Japan was Indian - and it had an Indian commanding officer. Transformation indeed. This superb book provides essential reading for scholars of the Indian army, the war in Burma, and the period just after.

Few authors have the depth of understanding needed to write an overall history of the Burma campaign and Lyman's work is a standard that joins those written by Louis Allen, Ray Callahan, Jon Latimer, and Frank McLynn, and yet Lyman's book offers more. There is academic rigour here, in itself a triumph when describing such a long campaign, but it is a rigour blended in a modern style with accounts from those present at the time. Combined with

Lyman's talent and clarity of description this book takes the reader from the aspirations of Grand Strategy to the perspective of an Indian Army Jawan in a foxhole. Empathy is a theme running through Lyman's text with an empathy for the soldiers of both sides fighting a merciless war in terrible conditions, but also an empathy for Japanese infantrymen, conventionally portrayed as savage and merciless, but nevertheless dutiful men whose lives were squandered by their incompetent commanders in 1944 and 1945.

What a boon it is to see the publication of two excellent books within months of each other, and within either book can be found the answers to why John Masters wrote what he did.

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