

Institution: King's College London		
Unit of Assessment: 27 English Language and Literature		
Title of case study: The Colour of War Memory: Decolonising the Memory of the First World War		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2012–2018		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Santanu Das	Professor	2012–2018
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014–2018		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		

1. Summary of the impact

Addressing the European Parliament in January 2020 about Brexit, Belgian MEP Guy Verhofstadt noted: *“Sad to see a nation leaving, a great nation that has given us all so much ... even its own blood in two world wars.”* Yet the ‘British’ blood spilled in the two world wars is often used to promote a white triumphalist nationalist narrative. The First World War is remembered as an all-white European combat on the Western Front, and the contribution of 4 million non-white troops – Indians, Africans, West Indians – is so completely erased that, until recently, few British nationals of South Asian or Afro-Caribbean origin knew that their ancestors fought in the First World War. The conventional all-white Armistice commemoration of First World War heroes can be profoundly alienating for Britain’s multi-racial populations. In the 1970s, the graves of Muslim First World War soldiers buried next to the Woking mosque were desecrated, while the Memorial to the Sikh and Hindu First World War veterans on the Sussex Downs was used as a rifle-practice site in the 1990s. In the lead-up to the centennial commemoration, the BNP chief Nick Griffin seized on the First World War to promote a far-right white nationalist view of Britain. Against this politicised background, King’s research challenged and changed this white nationalist narrative, diversifying and decolonising First World War memory, revising the timeline of non-white contribution to ‘British’ history from post-Second World War immigration to 1914–1918 war service, and using their research to combat racism and Islamophobia. We succeeded in:

- changing the colour of war memory in the media and public sphere, especially through affecting BBC coverage;
- highlighting the Muslim contribution to the Allied side in order to bring together diverse sectors to combat Islamophobia and militarism;
- diversifying centennial commemoration by introducing ethnic groups to non-white visual, cultural and musical First World War performances in London and regional hubs; and
- introducing Indians, British Indians and the Sikh community to their First World War heritage.

2. Underpinning research

Prior to this project, memories of the First World War focused narrowly on European troops and writers on the Western Front: more has been written on the four British trench poets (Owen, Sassoon, Graves and Blunden) than on the 4 million non-white men recruited into European and American armies. King’s researchers used extensive archival discoveries and comparative, interdisciplinary methodologies to challenge this narrative and focus instead on the role of colonial subjects (particularly 1.5 million Indians) in the First World War. We changed the colour of war memory and provided a more racially inclusive narrative, and we exposed the hierarchies of race and empire at the heart of the war as well as the brutality. At the same time, we found examples of inter-European and inter-racial cultural contact and romantic liaisons behind the lines created by the conditions of war. Our key interventions were as follows:

Reconceptualising the First World War from European trench combat to global conflict through fresh material, cultural and literary artefacts

How do we remember and represent the wartime experiences of men and women who did not know how to read or write and yet formed the majority of the world’s population in 1914–1918? King’s research went beyond the written word into a more creative engagement with and recovery

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of objects, images, sound-recordings and oral histories to examine non-white experiences. Through many years of archival work across Europe, South Asia, Australia and New Zealand, Das recovered an extraordinary amount of hitherto unknown material – trench objects such as the blood-stained glasses of an Indian soldier in Leeds Pals Battalion, a German helmet found with a Naga Battalion, an original recording of a song by a Gurkha soldier in a German POW camp in 1915 – along with censored letters, war diaries, journals, memoirs by Indian POWs held in Mesopotamia and a substantial but hitherto unknown body of verses, short stories, plays and fiction from South Asia. These materials were brought into dialogue through an interdisciplinary methodology to create a powerful alternative cultural and literary narrative of the First World War from below. These sources fed into *India, Empire, and First World War Culture*, which has been reviewed widely in popular press, nationally and internationally, and was awarded the Hindu non-fiction prize in India, the Ananda Coomaraswamy Prize in the US and the European Society for the Study of English (ESSE) Book Prize [1]. Rare archival images of Indian sepoys, with introductions, are collected in the bi-lingual visual history *Indian Troops in Europe, 1914–1918*, published in France and India [2].

Decolonising the archive and methodology of First World War Studies

King's researchers diversified and decolonised the First World War story from its traditional Eurocentric historiography by: (i) recovering hitherto unknown and unheard voices of non-white soldiers who had largely been erased from modern memory; (ii) establishing South Asian cultural figures such as Rabindranath Tagore and Mulk Raj Anand on a par with figures such as Owen and Sassoon; and (iii) recreating literary and sonic artefacts of the war era. This was made possible through two important methodological interventions: a redefinition of what constitutes the 'colonial archive' and the use of the 'literary' in historical recovery, as source-material and mode of reading. Being non-literate, we argued, does not mean being non-literary: King's research looked beyond the conventional written archive and recovered objects, images, songs and sound-recordings to tell their stories. As the *TLS* reviewer noted, "*Das brilliantly combines two approaches – 'a redefinition of the archive' and close, attentive reading Thrillingly, this close reading elevates some of Das's protagonists to a form of equality with the traditional First World War canon, to a kind of parity with Owen and Sassoon.*" Or, from India's main literary journal *Biblio: A Review of Books*: "*Das has written a book of immense significance.... It will encourage the next generation of scholars to abandon the crutches of disciplinary certainties ... [for] the promise of a dazzling array of new scholarship that knits visual, textual and literary sources together.*"

Exposing the colonial past

From books such as *First World War: Literature, Culture, Modernity* to articles like 'The Colors of the Past: Archive, Art and Amnesia', Das has offered a powerful critique of sanitised and triumphant-heroic narratives of the colonial contribution to the First World War, exposing instead contested and messy histories. 'Diversity', Das argues, does not necessarily mean decolonisation [3]. Through extensive comparative research in Europe and South Asia, the various hierarchies and ideologies of the empire, particularly around 'martial race theory', and different dietary regimes and accommodation for white and non-white troops were revealed and investigated to examine the relation between empire, race and the First World War [4].

Reconceiving the First World War as unprecedented inter-racial cultural encounter

The First World War is traditionally understood as a military clash of armies and nations. King's researchers challenged this through extensive historical evidence. Four million non-white men were recruited into the armies of Britain, France and Germany. Between 1914 and 1918, hundreds of thousands of South Asians, Africans and Pacific Islanders voyaged to the heart of whiteness – Europe – and beyond to take part in the war, resulting in unprecedented encounters. In wartime Ypres, there were people from 52 countries, including 200,000 Indians, 180,000 Chinese, 400,000 Vietnamese, 500,000 French colonial troops from different African nations, Maori Pioneer Battalions, African Native Labour contingents, Australians, Canadians and white South Africans. Scottish and Indian soldiers manned trenches together, Chinese coolies photographed themselves with Belgian boys and staged musical performances [6]. The range and degree of inter-racial contact was showcased in the online digital sourcebook *Cultural Exchange in a Time of Global Conflict* and in the forthcoming volume *Cultural Encounters in the First World War* (Routledge, 2020) and *Photography in the Time of War* (Bloomsbury, 2020).

3. References to the research

1. Das, S. (2018). *India, Empire and First World War Culture: Literature, Images, Objects and Songs*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
2. Das, S. (2014/2015). *1914–1918: Indian Troops in Europe / L'Inde dans la Grande Guerre, les Cipayes sur le front de l'ouest*. Paris: Gallimard; Ahmedabad: Mapin.
3. Das, S. & McLoughlin, K. (eds) (2018). *First World War: Literature, Culture, Modernity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; London: British Academy. Including Das and McLoughlin, Introduction (pp.1–35) and Das, *Entangled Emotions: Race, Encounters and Anti-colonial Cosmopolitanism* (pp.240–261).
4. Das, S. (2015). Reframing life/war 'writing'. *Textual Practice*, 29(7), 1265–1287.
5. Das, S. (2016). The Theatre of Hands. In L. Marcus & M. Mendelssohn (eds), *Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature: Late Victorian into Modern* (pp.379–397). Oxford: OUP.
6. Das, S. (2016). South Asian Literature of the First World War. In D. R. Cohen & D. Higbee (eds), *Teaching Representations of the First World War* (pp.125–37). New York: MLA.

4. Details of the impact

Prior to this project, the First World War was largely remembered as an all-white European combat on the Western Front. King's researchers changed this by including the contribution of 4 million non-white troops in popular television and radio programmes, public lectures, large-scale symposiums, exhibitions, concerts, dance-theatre and newspaper articles.

Changing the colour of war memory in the media and public sphere

Our project coincided with both the centenary of the First World War and a period of rising nationalism and xenophobia. We intervened to shape the commemorations of the war, challenging the all-white narratives and bringing widescale attention to the role of non-white combatants, particularly South Asians, in contributing to the much-vaunted heroism of the British military.

We changed the practice of media professionals in the UK by moving the BBC's dominant focus on British Tommies on the Western Front to the Middle East, Persia and East Africa. In 2013, Das was appointed as historical adviser to the BBC for its centenary coverage, including the acclaimed BBC2 documentary *The World's War* in August 2014, with sections based on Das's research. Showcasing the experiences of Asian, West Indian and African soldiers, the programme – watched by 2,000,000 viewers and later shown across North America and South Asia – foregrounded a global understanding of the war. It also began the presenting career of the now-celebrated Anglo-Nigerian broadcaster David Olusoga. The enthusiasm with which the programme was received led the BBC to commission Das to write and present the Radio 4 series *Soldiers of the Empire*, which was selected as 'Choice of the Week'. The Radio Producer and Programme Editor at the BBC remembers: "*Das shared rare archival material about South Asian sepoys which revealed the truly global scope of the war and helped to correct the Eurocentric bias in our understanding of WW1 in the public sphere, including previous WW1 Programmes in the BBC.... Das's research changed my view of the war and deepened my understanding. The programmes we made were a key contribution to the BBC's coverage of WW1 and thanks to Das's intervention the BBC is more aware of the importance of achieving a proper racial balance in the stories commissioned, especially on big occasions such as this 100th anniversary*" [A]. Das was then asked to present *Essays* for Radio 3 on writers such as the Indian Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore and Indian feminist Sarojini Naidu. In 2015, he took part in a British Council public debate on 'Race and Colonial War' in Dar Es Salaam, which was aired on BBC World Service. The originator of the British Council-BBC World Service partnership 'The War that Changed the World', reports: "*[Santanu] shared rare archival material about South Asian sepoys which revealed the truly global scope of the war and helped to correct the Eurocentric bias in the public understanding of WW1. [... M]y work with Santanu [...] deepened my understanding and enhanced considerably the appreciation of our audiences*" [B].

We used our research to bring hitherto unknown and marginalised colonial voices to public attention. In all Das's programmes and in interviews for the BBC's *Today* programme, *In Tune* and *The Jeremy Vine Show*, and national radio programmes in Australia, Canada and India, Das used his archival findings to enable forgotten Indians to live again, reading from censored letters and playing original sound recordings. His finding of a pair of blood-stained glasses of Bengali combatant Jogen Sen in Leeds Pals Battalion, reported from daily to vernacular newspapers in India, resulted in BBC Yorkshire commissioning an *Inside/Out* documentary. *The Yorkshire Post*

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noted: *“Private Sen was the only known non-white soldier to serve with the 15th West Yorkshire Regiment and was killed in action near the Somme in May 1916, aged 28. His story could easily have been forgotten had it not been for Dr Santanu Das”* [C].

Our research changed the perspectives of audience members at more than 80 public lectures. Head of Research and Academic Partnerships at the Imperial War Museum noted: *“Attending Santanu Das’s lectures transformed my understanding of the First World War. [...] I have been able to highlight Das’s work to my colleagues, and this has been invaluable as the IWM – like so many other national museums – continues to confront the colonial aspects of its collections and to try to present a more rounded picture of the history we document”* [E]. The influence of our research is ongoing. In a volume on teaching the First World War in schools, teacher and academic Dr Claire Buck claimed that *“no one has done more to change the colour of memory than Santanu Das”* [D].

Bringing together diverse sectors to combat Islamophobia and militarism

In the aftermath of the Brussels bombing and the associated wave of Islamophobia, Das brought together for the first time a wide range of sectors – members of the British Army and Navy, community leaders, curators from the National Army Museum, National Archives and Imperial War Museum, funders such as the HLF, academics, artists and activists – to combat Islamophobia with a discussion on commemoration. The conversation had two strands:

- how to instrumentalise the commemoration of colonial, particularly Muslim, soldiers who fought for the Allies to combat Islamophobia in wake of the terrorist attacks;
- interrogating Armistice commemorative practices and whether the sanitised, heroic and sacrificial narratives around soldiers, white or not-white, perpetuate a militarist culture.

The event was filmed and facilitated dialogue for the first time among sectors that do not usually come together for political, social or ideological reasons. The Regional Partnerships Community Manager at The National Archives noted: *“It was conducted just after the terrorist attacks in Brussels, and it provided a space for people of different backgrounds to address questions of Islamophobia and bias, and gave us a chance not only to challenge views on racial stereotypes but also understand their points of views and thus have a more reflective discussion. It also provided a space to heal.”* [I] For Muslims feeling alienated, the seminar sent a clear message to various sectors to use Muslim service in the two world wars to counter Islamophobic abuse. One result of the diverse conversations at this seminal meeting at KCL was the installation of a blue plaque for the South Asian Muslim Victoria Cross winner Mir Dast.

Diversifying centennial commemoration by introducing ethnic groups to non-white visual, cultural and musical First World War performances in London and regional hubs

Instead of telling heroic or martial tales of non-white participation, King’s researchers diversified First World War commemoration by placing recovered visual, literary and musical material at its centre through a series of creative collaborations with musicians, dancers and artists in diverse places and venues in India, Europe and the UK.

In 2014, Das organised an evening of war writings, songs and music from Europe, Asia, Africa and the Middle East in the KCL chapel in collaboration with the British Academy. It was the first example of European and non-European literature and music of the First World War being showcased together. Censored letters by Indian soldiers and African labourers were read alongside the war poems of Rabindranath Tagore and Katherine Mansfield. It was also the first time that a substantive South Asian and West Indian audience attended a First World War commemorative programme which, even in London, conventionally drew uniformly white audiences. The event was booked out, and feedback included: *“What it did was broaden my view of how many different ordinary people from around the world were deeply affected by Europe’s war. Absolutely stunning — has made me want to explore and find out more”*. At public request, the concert was performed again: in 2015 in collaboration with the German Historical Institute, thus bringing an additional German presence to the audience, and finally in 2018 at the palace in Prague, where the mix of literary and musical pieces was particularly fêted at a time of Brexit nationalism. At the Royal Albert Hall in 2018, letters by Indian soldiers were projected on a screen, and Sarojini Naidu’s poem was read out by Muslim actress Nina Wahida, both items found by Das.

King’s researchers exhibited their findings in the Maughan Library (24 October – 17 December 2016). Attendees at these public events summed up broader audience responses: *“Like many people, my grandfather was called up in WWI and I know very little about his life in Mesopotamia*

and elsewhere. I had very little knowledge of the 'cultural' aspects of WWI and therefore I have been very enlightened"; "I had no idea how international – the richness and range of feeling and suffering from so many people, peoples, countries... So diverse and yet so united in feeling" [F].

Introducing Indians, British Indians & the Sikh community to their First World War heritage

In 2018, Das acted as historical advisor and shared his archival material and expertise with the renowned choreographer Gary Clark to produce the dance-theatre *By My Troth*, based on an Indian First World War short story. It was produced by the South Asian theatre company Akademi and used British Asian actors and dancers, premiering first at the opening evening of the Jaipur Literary Festival in India and then at the Curve, Leicester. Das's writings also directly inspired musical performances of *Sacred Sound: Sikh Music and the First World War*, conducted by the arts group Alchemy, at the Royal Armoury in Leeds in 2017, which was attended by a huge local Sikh audience in and around Leeds. The director of Alchemy wrote: *"His research directly inspired two spoken word pieces and accompanying music performed by young British Asian musicians in front of large audience[s across venues].... Santanu transformed our views about the colour of war memory in Britain and opened the eyes of British Asian youths of today (as well as the older generation) to the role their ancestors played in the war and how they in turn can now make First World War Memory their own too. His publications and presentations had made a tangible difference to our understanding of the global and non-white dimensions of the conflict, as well as its literary and musical practices, which in turn will influence the present generation of British Asian youths to carry them forward and contribute towards the making of a more diverse society"* [G].

King's researchers enabled the Sikh community in the UK to claim the war as part of their very particular shared history with Britain. Over four years, Das collaborated with UK Punjab Heritage and gave lectures at local sites including the Brighton Pavilion and Dome (2017), Sri Guru Ravidass Sabha & Community Centre in Bedford (18 May 2019) and Wealdstone Library in Harrow (29 June 2019). Head of Projects at UK Punjab Heritage Association noted: *"As a contributor and specialist advisor to our three-year project 'Empire, Faith & War: The Sikhs & World War One', Professor Das has helped diversify war memory so that the Sikh community in the UK can now claim it as part of their shared heritage with Britain.... During the exhibition run, Professor Das gave a very well-attended lecture at the Brunei Gallery on the Sikh contribution to the conflict. By drawing on rare archival imagery, literature and songs, he substantially enriched and changed our understanding of the war – particularly the important role played by the Sikhs. With the help of Professor Das, the Sikh community has experienced a profound shift in its sense of ownership of the story of the Sikhs' contribution in the First World War. This will, we believe, help inter-community dialogue, strengthen Anglo-Sikh relations, give people a greater sense of identity, and undoubtedly help in combating racism in today's and future generations"* [H].

Das complemented his work on national media with personalised engagements at regional hubs, interacting with a diverse range of ethnic minorities and telling them not just about the South Asian war contribution but its selective appropriation by particular religious groups, the dangers of 'heroic' narratives and the traditions of anti-war dissent within India. His repeated caveats about the dangers of sanitising history impacted the museum and creative sectors too. The Regional Partnerships Community Manager at The National Archives noted: *"by stressing [history's] contested nature, he made it more possible for us to both celebrate the fact that Indians served in the war whilst also offering a chance to open up a space to critique the imperial relationship. As a direct result of working with Santanu we commissioned five short plays and published an online education bundle that used our records, both of which have been very warmly received"* [I].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

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- A. *The World's War* audience figures; testimonial from BBC Radio Producer & Programme Editor.
 - B. Testimonial from British Council project originator and collaborator.
 - C. *The Yorkshire Post* article.
 - D. Buck, C. (2015). *Conceiving Strangeness in British First World War Writing*. London: Palgrave.
 - E. Testimonial from Imperial War Museum Head of Research and Academic Partnerships.
 - F. Event feedback/responses, 2014–2018; HERA list of activities.
 - G. Testimonial from Alchemy Director.
 - H. Testimonial from UK Punjab Heritage Association Head of Projects.
 - I. Testimonial from National Archives Regional Partnerships Community Manager.