Sikh soldiers and the First World War – a history to be told

22/10/2013

Thanks to a grant of almost £450,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) the First World War Centenary commemorations will see this untold story revealed in a number of fascinating ways over a three year period.

London-based United Kingdom Punjab Heritage Association (UKPHA) and its volunteers will be combing regimental histories, official dispatches, correspondence and war grave records among other sources to create a detailed picture of the Sikh involvement in the conflict. Crucially they will combine these materials with family recollections and personal memorabilia from Sikhs living in the UK to create as comprehensive a picture as possible of the lives of those who fought, as well as of those who they left behind.

Although accounting for just 2% of the population of British India at the time, the Sikhs made up more than 20% of the British Indian Army at the outbreak of hostilities. By the end of the war around 130,000 Sikhs saw active service. They fought on most of the war's major fronts, from the Somme to Gallipoli, and across Africa and the Middle East, Sikhs fought alongside their British and Indian counterparts to serve the greater good.

A key aspect of the project will be the involvement of younger people and people from all backgrounds, Sikh and non-Sikh alike. Volunteers of all ages will be invited to help with the research. Descendants of Sikh soldiers who fought in the conflict will be interviewed and the recordings added to the information being collected alongside memorabilia such as medals, uniforms and photographs. Other material will include posters, contemporary newspaper reports, postcards as well as artefacts and documents in the collections of a range of museums, libraries and archives.

The information gathered during the project will augment archives held by the Imperial War Museum and the British Library, who along with the National Army Museum and other national and local museums, arts groups, and schools will partner with UKPHA on various aspects of the project. A major result will be a special twelve-week exhibition at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, during the summer of 2014, featuring interactive displays and an educational kids' zone. It will also result in a documentary film, commemorative publication, educational packs for schools, and a programme of outreach events, all designed to provide opportunities for members of the public to take part and learn in a number of exciting ways.

The project will also see the development of digital education packs for schools to ensure that current and future generations can learn about this remarkable history. Working with educational experts and the Historical Association, UKPHA will ensure that much needed educational materials are made available, highlighting the Sikh and the wider non-white contribution to the First World War.

Similarly the project database – linked to the Imperial War Museum's own Lives of the First World War site – will ensure that there is a lasting legacy for the individual stories of Sikh combatants and those they left behind. The open access site will enable for the first time these memories and memorabilia to be collated and made accessible for families, the community, historians and researchers alike. Members of the public will be encouraged to undertake their own [guided] research into their and others' family histories to help create the database, the commemorative publication and exhibition materials.

The Sikhs, once fierce adversaries of the British during the two bitterly contested Anglo-Sikh Wars in the Punjab during the mid-19th century, played a disproportionately large role, given their numbers, as part of the British Empire forces in the First World War. They went on to have a major impact in terms of campaigns fought, medals and commendations won and the widespread respect and reputation they gained as fighters.

Wesley Kerr, Chairman HLF Committee for London, said: "The First World War was a seminal event in modern history, touching every continent and involving millions of civilians and soldiers throughout the British Empire. The 130,000 Sikhs who served on various fronts, taking heavy casualties, played a crucial role. The Heritage Lottery Fund is very pleased to support this fascinating, landmark project which will enlist citizen historians to chronicle the past and bring to life powerful, important stories for a new audience of today's Britons. HLF is committed to funding a variety of projects, from organisations large and small, to create a deeper understanding of the heritage of the conflict capturing the memories of individual soldiers, regiments or families. We have already supported over £28m of projects from across the United Kingdom and will continue to support as many strong applications as we can afford to commemorate the centenary."

UKPHA Chair, Amandeep Madra, said: "UKPHA is delighted to have received Heritage Lottery Fund support for our ambitious project. Given the major commemorations that will be taking place nationwide in 2014, this seemed like the appropriate time for the Sikh contribution to be recognised in a fitting way."

He continued: "The role of Sikhs in the Great War is a largely unknown but fascinating part of the story of the Allied war effort and indeed 'the British story'. UKPHA looks forward to revealing the untold stories of these soldiers and, just as importantly, the families they left behind, and we will be calling on people from all backgrounds to help us in doing so."

Notes to editors

In the ill-fated Gallipoli Campaign in 1916, the 14th Sikh Regiment sustained very heavy casualties. Their commanding officer General Ian Hamilton wrote of them after the battle: "Their devotion to duty and their splendid loyalty to their orders and to their leaders make a record their nation should look upon with pride for many generations."

A major emphasis will be placed on involving younger people in the project and on involving Sikhs and non-Sikhs alike to explore this remarkable story. This will include the provision of structured learning and volunteering opportunities, offering new skills training and chances to work with professional institutions and experts. The project will run for three years from 2014-16.

The UK Punjab Heritage Association (UKPHA) is a non-profit voluntary organisation based in London. It was founded in 2001 to foster a greater appreciation of Punjabi heritage in Britain and encourage the preservation of endangered items of Punjabi material heritage. Further information can be obtained at the UKPHA website.

UKPHA is a registered partner of the Imperial War Museum's First World War Centenary Partnership, a network of over 1,400 local, regional, national and international cultural and educational organisations. Together, they will present a vibrant global programme of cultural events and activities, which will connect current and future generations with the lives, stories and impact of the First World War. For more information, visit the First World War Centenary website.

Further information

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