	Second World War: Legacies, Language and Diaspora – Bonus Episode	THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES

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When you think of the soldiers who fought for Britain and the Allies in the Second World War, you might picture young lads from Morecambe or officers who attended Sandhurst. But you might not consider someone from the coast of East Africa who speaks Swahili, or a Hindustani-speaking person from what is now South Asia.

In this episode of On the Record, host Chloe Lee speaks with Iqbal Singh and Liz Haines, specialists at The National Archives, and writer Sharmila Chauhan. Together, they delve into a unique collection of records about soldiers recruited from Britain's colonies, exploring everything from the speeches of British commanders in Hindustani to powerful artworks designed to portray fighting for the British Empire as the only moral choice.

You can find the full-length audio dramas on Soundcloud: Until my Last Breath by Sharmila Chauhan and Motherland by Ery Nzaramba.

Documents from The National Archives used in this episode: WO 169/7529, INF 2/12, WO 203/2045, INF 2/9.

For more information about the records covered in this episode, look at our research guides to Second World War – an overview, Indian Army personnel, Soldiers in African forces under British control. Read our blog series, 'Perfectly suited to time travel: Audio drama at The National Archives', 'Second World War records in Swahili and Hindustani – in audio drama', 'Language and empire: Encountering records to write audio drama' For help navigating our catalogue, you can watch our top-level tips on using Discovery.

[1] *Header image: 'Broadcasting news to African troops' from the booklet East Africans at War, INF 2/10*

Transcript

Chloe Lee: Think of the soldiers who fought for Britain and the allies in the Second World War and you might think of young lads from Morecambe or officers who attended Sandhurst. You might not be thinking about someone from the coast of East Africa who speaks Swahili, or a Hindustani-speaking person from the country now recognised as India.

We are now starting to recognise the war as a multi-racial, multi-ethnic global conflict with global legacies. Its combatants from Britain's imperial possessions in Africa and Asia, referred to as 'colonial troops', were called upon to meet the rapidly expanding needs of the war, but their stories don't often feature in our broad understanding of the conflict.

I'm Chloe Lee, a Migration and Citizenship Researcher at The National Archives. I also host our podcast, On the Record at The National Archives, uncovering the past through stories of everyday people.

In this episode of On the Record, I want to dig into a collection of records, held at The National Archives, that are connected to the experiences of the colonial troops. We hold thousands of papers from this history, from speeches of the British generals speaking in Hindustani to bilingual phrase books, and from propaganda magazines to powerful artworks that were intended to make fighting for the empire look like the only moral choice.

As we approach the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War in 2025, historians here at Kew have started to explore this history in new ways. This includes looking through the multitude of languages through which colonial troops participated in the war, and bringing some of those languages to life in audio dramas which you'll hear throughout the episode.

Before we start properly, I want to give a content warning. Some of these stories are about colonial violence and its legacy. They can make us feel distressed, sad, and angry - they're not always easy to listen to, but they're really important in our understanding of the past.

I want to start this episode by speaking to Iqbal Singh who is the regional community partnerships manager at The National Archives and a specialist in colonial soldiers, seamen and workers, and

the imperial state.

Iqbal is one of the historians who is deeply involved in our collection of records about South Asia and the First and Second World Wars.

I wanted to find out more about his connection to the collection...

Chloe: Welcome, Iqbal. Welcome to the studio. I'm really looking forward to talking to you for On The Record. What do you do, when you come into the National Archives? What does a day look like?

Iqbal Singh: Very people centred. I'm very lucky, I'm part of the outreach team. It's very public engagement focused. It's very much about applied work, as opposed to sort of that pure work of just looking at records. You know, the research is key to my work, but it's about how you then apply that research in the public sphere.

Chloe: That's really interesting. And has there been a record recently that has really jumped out for you?

Iqbal: Well, I mean, the record that's really jumped out for me is the Tuker record. It's the record of Tuker's speech to the Indian troops that's been written out in a Romanised Hindustani.

Chloe: And where does that sit within our collection? Can you remind me?

Iqbal: That's a War Office record, and the collection that it comes from is a rich collection of sort of, you know, sometimes little notes and diary notes from officers about what's going on. Sometimes you've got these speeches. You've got appendices that can sometimes be very technical. And so this speech sits within that and it's an extraordinary speech.

Chloe: And are we early or later in the war?

Iqbal: We're about '42, 1942, the Indian troops have now arrived in Africa, and they're part of this Commonwealth effort to defeat the Axis powers and the Germans, basically in North Africa. And

so Tuker is preparing a speech to rally the men, as it were, and it's got a Shakespearean quality to it, but written out in this Hindustani, but it's in a in a Romanised script.

AUDIO DRAMA CLIP - Until My Last Breath by Sharmila Chauhan

[Until My Last Breath was created in response to Major Tucker's speech WO 169/7529]

Chloe: And so when you read that speech, how did that feel?

Iqbal: I mean, I was deeply moved because it reminded me of my own childhood, growing up speaking Urdu in my own family house, and parts of that are split off when you go into school and workplaces where people only see you as somebody who speaks English. So having that private moment was actually really important for me, because it suddenly reconnected me with my childhood, and both my parents sang, sang ghazals and sort of Indian songs, for use of a better term. And the poetry was really important, and the language that was used in that speech, because it was written in this high register, it was written in quite a flowery text, it reminded me of the poetry that we would sing at home. Some of the words had that poetic quality to them. So yeah, there was an emotional moment. I thought very much about my parents. And even now I can slightly feel that welling up.

Chloe: There's something that sits along there, like there's the official state archive, the recorded archive, and then what sits in our own personal archive, and how they jostle up against each other and shape each other, actually.

Iqbal: Yep. Absolutely. And there was that jostling up completely. I mean, you know, the tear did well up, and the memory comes quite quickly. You know, to think about my parents, the singing, how they met on the ship coming here, and Urdu, in Hindustani, was the language that they used. It was their lingua franca. My mother's a Sikh. My father's a Muslim. They were coming on a boat here in 1960 the thing that was their common bit amongst a number of other things, but they were cultural commonalities was language, and this shared language, the language of Bollywood as well. It's the language that North Indians certainly know very well.

Chloe: It's so moving hearing about that, Iqbal, I can see it in my head that you know, moment of your parents meeting, what do you think they would have made of the work that you do every day?

Iqbal: Yeah, I think for them, I mean, it's been a very important journey, seeing me grow into this role and this work and drawing out these types of records and these connections, I think, would mean a huge amount to them, because for them, as poetry, literature, this language that they shared and loved, just knowing that you're still engaged with it, and that inheritance, that legacy, hasn't just been squandered. Whether you're making something of it, you're trying to make a connection with it. And for me, as I say, I'm very privileged in the position, I'm in, the ability to then put a platform out and allow others to also share in those conversations about those mother tongues, those split-off sets of our identities, those other things that we might, you know, remind us of our own parents. But using your own story as a way of doing that, and language, as I say, is such an important sensibility, because if you don't teach a child you know, for example, 'the mother tongue', the child you know, does miss out on something quite special. If you know the parents came from somewhere else, and that child can't connect with that, because language is often the window, the vehicle through which you make those connections.

Chloe: It's not often you get to hear a historian like Iqbal having such a personal response to an archival record. So I'm really grateful for him sharing his stories there.

Like Iqbal, I was intrigued by these colonial troops' records. So I wanted to know more.

I invited Iqbal back, this time with his colleague Liz Haines, to tell me more about the history of the colonial troops.

Chloe: Welcome back to Studio.

Iqbal: Hi Chloe.

Liz Haines: Hi Chloe.

Chloe: So I want to understand the role of colonial troops in Britain's history, and I guess specifically we're looking at the Second World War. Liz, can you tell me a bit more about their role?

Liz: Sure. I mean, I think the main thing to understand is that they were absolutely essential to to the outcome of the Second World War, that the troops that fought on the side of the allies were absolutely indispensable to the outcome that that, you know, that transpired, but also just that it was on a it was on a scale which I think people often aren't, don't understand or aren't familiar with. So for example, we're looking today at soldiers from from South Asia or undivided India as it was, and East Africa. There were between two and a half to 3.3 million, depending on different estimates, soldiers—

Chloe: Vast numbers!

Liz: Vast numbers—just from South Asia. And about 250,000 from East Africa, and so, for example, that's about 20% of the adult male population of Kenya who were fighting in the second world.

Chloe: So one in five?

Liz: One in five adult men. So those, those numbers and those, that quantity of people was obviously hugely important in actual combat. In parallel, the colonies were also a really important resource, like, in terms of natural resources for making equipment, for keeping people fed. So the colonies were also a site of huge importance in that sense. So there was tension between people who were being enrolled as soldiers and the need to maintain local economies. But the numbers, those numbers of people who are engaged in fighting and supporting fighting in all kinds of different roles, I think, is one of the things that we really need to recognise about that period.

Chloe: It's really interesting because those numbers, when we're thinking about our role as historians, the amount of stories there, that's what's so intriguing to me. And when we're starting that journey, maybe some of us are only starting that journey. I know you and Iqbal, are very invested in that already—what should guide us?

Liz: You're right. It's the stories of millions of people, and that's, I mean, thinking about, for

example, South Asia and East Africa. That's more than the number of people who served from the UK. So, you know, that's really large, in relation to the numbers of British people who were involved in fighting. But I think also, there's all of those personal stories. But I think one of the things that it's really important to understand is that those soldiers were coming from societies where they were living as colonial subjects, not as citizens, but they were living under colonial administration in ways that disadvantaged them and, in some cases, actively oppressed them in complicated ways. So those people who were signing up, technically, there was no conscription. But we also have lots of stories of people who were forcibly enrolled or enlisted against their will, but those people who joined up were engaged in a conflict that didn't have anything like the same significance or meaning for them as maybe for people in the UK. They weren't defending a way of life that was their own. They were defending a society that was exploiting them.

Chloe: It's very complicated to try and understand that and the motivations behind that, right?

Liz: Absolutely. And I think if you're again thinking about that broader colonial context, in all around what was the British Empire at that time, there were lots of struggles for independence and nationalist movements. There was an active anti-colonial struggle in the context of unified India, of South Asia. That was very, very developed by that point, and to the point where people were favouring the Japanese as potential allies. People were signing up to fight with the Japanese against the Allies.

Chloe: With the future possibility that they might support...

Liz: Yes.. liberation from British rule. And again, thinking about the East African context, the future leader, the first prime minister and future leader of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta was in the UK at that time and very much engaged in pan-African, anti-colonial politics. And again, amongst lots of pan-Africanists, there was resistance to this idea of the war and the idea of serving an empire that had that yeah, that wasn't offering them rights. And it was slow to respond to their demands for equality and for freedom.

Iqbal: If I can pick up on what Liz has said. And I think it's important that Liz has given us a good background there. I think one thing that I really do want to also emphasise, and I think it's a point that you've raised, is the complexity of what's going on. So the motivations of the Indian troops,

for example, are both, you know, driven by elements of dissent, but also extraordinary levels of loyalty, and it's how that loyalty is fostered. And so in that sense, you know, the technical term is the subaltern, but the soldier who's basically somebody who's paid to do a job, they're not, you know, senior, but how you bring them in and draw them in?

They don't fit the model of, say, you know, the nationalist voices that are anti British, there are, there's a lot of them invested, have invested in this war. There are a different subaltern.

Chloe: So when was this all happening? I know we're in the Second World War, but if you can maybe give a little bit of context as to when we're talking and why?

Iqbal: I think the thing to understand is, that in 1939 India enters the war, not with the permission of the Indian leadership. So it's already creating a huge amount of tension amongst the Indian political leadership of the form of Indian National Congress. Their backs are up, but the army has got a long tradition in India of working and offering opportunities. The First World War had seen men who served and then gained land. They gained, you know, status, credibility. So the army certainly had a pull. And so in many ways, once the war really starts to kick off. And from the 40s onwards, and so the early 40s, I should say, and then the entry of Japan in '42 with the kinds of defeats it then imposes on Britain, it creates a need to expand the army at exponential rates. And that, I think, is really important to hold on to, because the army changes from something that's in the hundreds of thousands in India's story to in the millions, as Liz has referred to, and taking that manpower and managing it faces all kinds of challenges.

Chloe: Liz, can you talk to me a little bit about this drive across the Commonwealth to recruit and what that looked like, and what was driving British generals and politicians to think of colonial troops?

Liz: At the outset of the war, it wasn't really a huge priority for the British. Some established areas, like the British Indian Army were...

Chloe: They were established.

Liz: They were going to be involved. But it was really sort of through the war, and particularly with

the war turning and the involvement of Japan, that the numbers of fronts on which the Allies were fighting, and the change in the nature of warfare, because they were fighting in different environments. So fighting, for example, in Burma, in jungle environments, the type, the nature of warfare, and the scale of the number of fronts that were being managed, shifted from.

Chloe: Something like a Europe, a European, maybe something that we're more familiar with, the European front, to a global conflict?

Liz: Yeah, earlier in the war, they'd already been fighting in North Africa and East Africa. But they were environments which in which the British and the allies were more familiar in encountering, but particularly, I guess, in Southeast Asia, that was a really different kind of terrain. But more importantly, it was really about literally the sort of scale of the front that was opening and maintaining against the Japanese, who were really formidable.

Chloe: Maintaining the line.

Liz: So the Japanese had advanced all the way through Southeast Asia by that point, and were on the boundaries of India. So they were right at the doorstep. So I think that that changed both the ideas about resourcing, but also about manpower, what was needed to maintain an active resistance against an army that had, the Japanese in particular, that had suddenly really become much more of a threat than had been anticipated.

Chloe: So it wasn't much of a priority, say 1939 apart from maybe established groups, British Indian Army, we've talked about, how did the British recruit and strategies to retain those colonial troops?

Iqbal: This is, I think, the key thing our records help to feed into this, because a lot of the records that we hold are related to propaganda. They're related to trying to keep people basically on side, to get people to do what you need them to do. And so whether it's a propaganda report looking at morale. Morale is a really important thing. They're constantly looking at the morale of the troops. What things can we do to help these troops fight for us?

Chloe: And Liz what collection is these propaganda records kept in?

Liz: We see them in different places. So we see some discussion, particularly around these discussions around morale and how the soldiers were feeling. They gathered this information from reading their letters home, from censorship. So they had this idea of how people were feeling about things. But also we see them in the Colonial Office. So at that point, the war office is responsible for coordinating the military effort. The Colonial Office is responsible for, I guess, mediating the British Empire and the British government and managing British colonial administration. So they are interested in both the experiences of the soldier, the challenges of recruiting soldiers, but also very much the relationship between soldiers and their families and wider civil society. So the Colonial Office records are really interesting in the way that we see that relationship, particularly between the soldiers. The need, the military need, and the demand and the impact that that's having on wider civil society. So that's directly the soldiers' families, but also, broader social and economic issues.

Chloe: I see. So these records are kept to keep a record of morale, which should inform the authorities about keeping on those soldiers. What does the propaganda look like?

Iqbal: I mean, there's various things. We've got magazines which were being printed. For example, the Fauji Akbar magazine, which is basically, you know, crudely translated 'Army Newspaper', and it's written in different languages, and it's a way of basically giving a view of the war that will keep the troops positive. Because, you know, India is going through, certainly in India's case, in that mid 40s period, economically, there are lots of difficulties. There's, as I say, the victories the Japanese are having. It's creating real concern around morale generally. And so these types of activities are there to try and keep people up and also recruitment. So this is the other thing to really take into mind, that traditional recruitment that was occurring, certainly in the First World War around the martial races. These are the Punjabis, those from that sort of Northwestern areas of India, by the Second World War, recruitment opens up. So they're looking south, they're looking north, they're looking elsewhere.

Chloe: And my assumption is, then that their strategies at recruitment change. They have to change...

Iqbal: Well, recruitment. I mean, I think the thing is you need to get the message out all over the

country, basically. And so some of our records also speak to that. So we have, you know, some flyers, propaganda-type material. Again, that's sort of written in Marathi, in Telugu, in Tamil. I mean, I've never seen stuff like this. But in the Second World War, you're seeing these types of documents appearing in Gujarati. I mean, these are not the traditional sort of recruiting grounds for Indians. So it's not just about the troops, but keeping people on side as well.

This is the other thing to just, just, you know, keep in mind is that for, for, certainly for the army, this idea that the offensive spirit is not just about, you know, the military element of the training that's needed and the weapon, but actually learning languages, learning how you communicate. Those softer skills, they're also part of the offensive armoury that's now needed to really be taken seriously.

Chloe: Yeah, that's really interesting. Those ideas of soft skills and Liz, have you found that as well in your work?

Liz: Yeah. So I mean thinking on in terms of practical format we've got, posters, very graphically designed posters. Similar in nature to the kind of propaganda you can imagine from the UK. There's lots of wartime propaganda that people might have be familiar with around,

Chloe: Yeah, those very, I could, you know, dig for victory, exactly. Very evocative.

Liz: Yeah. So some of that is being designed and produced in London and sent out to East Africa, and some of it's being designed and produced locally. So alongside those posters, which we have examples of in English and Swahili and in other African languages. We also have booklets. So, we have booklets that tell a story: what does a career of a soldier look like? What are the opportunities that open up? And we know that those booklets, which are basically photo books, were also came alongside films. So they would be going around, around different parts of East Africa with a van projecting films and recruiting, calling people up, talking to audiences, talking to villagers, explaining again, through these picture narratives, what could be expected. Which of course, always takes a sort of glamorous point of view, where people are getting lots to eat, they're getting to engage with modern technology

Chloe: Appealing to, that social mobility effect. Because, as you said before, these people are

colonial subjects. They're not citizens.

Liz: Yeah, so at that time in East Africa, I mean, it would be different in different parts of India, but in East Africa, large parts of the population are still engaged in subsistence agriculture. Not that many people have salaries. So to have a wage, a salary

Chloe: That you know is going to come in, or however it's given out...

Liz: Exactly. It is really important, and most of those salary opportunities are in domestic service or in really poorly paid jobs. The Army's paying better than all of those. So, I mean in that sense, you know, recruitment has an obvious

Chloe: Financial benefit.

Liz: Absolutely. But they're also playing on that wider idea of modernisation and social advancement. So, yeah, engagement with this, these questions of learning languages, learning skills like being electrical technicians or mechanics. Skills which would potentially lead to more gainful, more profitable employment and social mobility after the war.

Chloe: We see that in the propaganda. What I've looked at, those big posters. Can you maybe describe one of those for a signal? I mean, oh, if that rings true for you, I think the thing

Iqbal: I'm really interested in bringing into this is also this thing about, sorry, language again, just to pick up on Liz's point. Language is really important in all of what's going on. And so what the British, certainly in India, are picking up on is that we've expanded the army exponentially. Officers are coming in who have got no real background in India. Because, you know, pre the war, you know, there was a much longer process in which you learnt the language, you learnt how to work with your troops, your Indian troops. Suddenly, British officers are literally being helicoptered in, as it were, and brought in to the field of battle, and have to learn on the language, on the job, basically.

So these Romanised scripts, not just the speeches, but also like, you know, we've got one of our records as an anti-tank gun manual, and it's giving basic instructions about how you look after that

operation. And so literally, words are translated, sometimes in quite funny ways to try and describe elements of, you know, an anti-tank technical activity that you've got to take part in. So I think that language element is really, really important to keep in mind.

Chloe: And then you've got an officer talking to you in your own language, evoking these big ideas, big concepts. I can see how that would be very persuasive.

Iqbal: Absolutely. And for Indian troops in particular, it wasn't the traditional ways in which they were motivated, say, for example, patriotism or nationalism. In that way, I see it was often they were very aligned to their regiment, to their officer, possibly, and also to the sense of duty

Chloe: And is that evoked in the speech?

Iqbal: That's evoked in the speech to certain words like 'farz', which is 'duty'. And the other thing that often was driving people was the economic side. People, you know, applied because it was a volunteer army. They didn't need to conscript, because India has a huge population, and there was a lot of rural poverty. People were willing to, apply and get those jobs. And this idea of 'kurz', which is the other word, which is 'debt', but pay your debts. So 'farz' and 'kurz 'are like these tram lines along which many Indian lives were being led. And so, in many ways. It's very interesting how those concepts are being evoked in this speech.

CLIP - Until my Last Breath by Sharmila Chauhan

[Until My Last Breath was created in response to Major Tucker's speech WO 169/7529]

Chloe: I mean duty we talk a lot about when we're having discussions about Second World War and contributions of soldiers that we might more, more traditionally assume to be associated with conflict, but debt that sits quite uncomfortably with me. Can you speak a bit more to that when you speak about debt in this colonial context?

Iqbal: Well, in the context of people having to earn a living, and you know, whether you were, subject to a money lender, or you needed to make ends meet, because your crop didn't do well. There's all those kinds of drivers that are leading people to find this type of work

Chloe: And fight in this war?

Iqbal: And fight in the war, absolutely.

Chloe: And you know, at this time, India is still a colonial possession.

Iqbal: India is still a colonial possession. And I mean, the other big thing to understand is that by 1942 the Quit India movement has taken off big time. So Gandhi and the nationalists, the Indian National Congress

Chloe: And this speech is '42

Iqbal: So this is '42 as well. So it's all in that same period when Indian nationalism was at a height. The Indian National Congress, which was the largest political party in India, were basically extremely upset that India had been brought into the war without Indian leaders being consulted.

Chloe: Liz, maybe if I can bring you in there, what are the differences then between, you know, I've heard from Iqbal about propaganda and Indian context. What about the East African context?

Liz: Sure, and I think I need to preface that by saying that I'm a white British person who doesn't speak Kiswahili, so I don't have the same access to to the language at all, but particularly the nuances of language that Iqbal does when he's working with these records. I rely on other people's interpretation of them and engagement with them. So I don't have quite the same, or anything like the same level of subtlety in my reading of them.

But I would say that from looking at the types of propaganda that we can see in relation to East Africa, the focus is, I think, less nuanced, more directed at that question of prestige and status and modernization. It's more focused on what the war might do for individuals within society. And I think, again, thinking about that relationship between the soldiers as individuals, their families and communities, it's also about justifying the sacrifice or the role of the soldiers in that colonial endeavour. So it's about making it look glamorous. It's about modernisation. It's about personal gain. But it's also trying to make sense of those soldiers in engagement and injury and death

within a broader picture of what colonial modernity might look like as well, I guess.

Chloe: It's really interesting and it's so nuanced. Can you maybe describe then the challenges to understanding these records be great to hear from both of you on that?

Iqbal: I think certainly for me, one of the big challenges of looking at the language records was underneath that, looking at a Hindustani record, are many of the sectarian and communal tensions that sit beneath, both at that time and post war as well. That Hindi-Urdu tension that exists. How do you put Hindustani in its context when you're reading a Hindustani text, it's often referred to as Urdu. Urdu has largely become associated with Muslims in India, and so I think, trying to understand the record and how you place it in its context, and how people would have received it, who would have received it, and also it's written in a as I say, in quite a flowery register. How would, for a large amount of men, they would have been illiterate, so they would have certainly had a language they spoke, but some of the words that are being used would have gone way over their heads, and some of the phrases as well. So I mean, it's trying to understand, how was it received? And then also, how was it read out....

Chloe: It shows the diversity of recruitment at that level. And I think it's really important to stay here as well, that there are other parts of empire where propaganda is disseminated. And you know we're talking about these specific contexts today.

Liz, and I know you've touched on maybe some of the complexities of doing this when you're a historian, bringing or not bringing that lived experience, or something that you can touch into in terms of your own personal history... But there must be challenges in this work when we think about the racist attitudes towards troops?

Liz: Absolutely. You're reading, your reading statements which are explicitly racist. So for example, you're reading extracts from censored letters. So soldiers who are writing home, talking about their personal lives, talking about their hopes, their dreams, you're seeing them ripped out of the context of the letters that they written to their families and being instrumentalised to try and work out, you know what they need to do slightly differently in order to make sure that everyone keeps fighting.

So, for example, you see stories of people who have requested leave and been to go home to a family funeral and not had the permission granted in time or various, other kinds of personal tragedies unfolding, but within the not, only the machinery of military might and the force, the force of the allies, but also interpreted and framed in very racist ways. So that in itself, is challenging.

I think one of the things which is hardest to read, and it's sometimes hard to even know how to present it to people, is one of the training manuals for Kiswahili that I've been looking at, where the language is a language book. It's a language learning book. It's like a text on how to speak Swahili. So it's got the grammar broken down, it's got exercises. It's like anything that you might find in school. And this would be distributed to soldiers themselves and the officers. But what they're being asked to translate is fundamentally ideas, so they're key phrases, or stock phrases that white British people would have been using in East Africa at the time. So they're talking and, of course, then the way that they're talking about Africans and what's being invoked as an idea of the African through this language training is very brutally racist.

Chloe: So, you've got this, like co-option of language, but then you've also got this doubling down of racist stereotype that is literally being spoken out, spoken through, spoken to people fighting on the behalf of of Britain in the war, who have volunteered to do that.

OK, so we've heard a little bit about the challenges of those records, you know, really kind of, also very personal, emotional challenges I think. What are the opportunities in bringing these records out of the archives?

Liz: So we'd found a selection of records, and how we started out was, was just by inviting fighting people to come and look at them and think through them with us. So we invited producer Fin Kennedy, and he in turn invited two writers, Ery Nzaramba and Sharmila Chauhan, who have who have their own relationships with the with the two regions in question, their own, their own heritage and relationships to them. They came and sat and looked at the records with us, and that was the starting point for their creative process.

Iqbal: The opportunity, and we've worked with audio drama before, but this particular project, audio seems such a powerful way to enter what I am framing as the psychological worlds in which

these stories, that we're uncovering in the records, need to be processed. There's a world there, a psychological world. The records draw out things that are going on in people's heads, in terms of whether they're having to speak out a speech that is in a language they don't have any clue of really, or how it's being received, how they're being trained to do that. But also the people who then, like ourselves and my generation, the generations that follow, thinking about how we then receive that information. There's a lot going on in our heads, and audio drama is very powerful in getting us to think about that psychological world. So I think for me, that's where the opportunities have really come.

CLIP - Until my Last Breath by Sharmila Chauhan

Chloe: This has touched on this idea that we do have extracts of voices and letters, but this opportunity of audio drama allows us to speak back to the record. Liz, how do you feel about exploring the records in this way?

Liz: I think it's really powerful. So in this context, what we have are a lot of records which are very dry. We have, as Iqbal has mentioned, training manuals. We have language training manuals. We've got these reports. We don't really have anything but tiny fragments of personal stories, and it's very difficult, or I think it's impossible, to understand what any of this means without thinking about it through the lens of someone who went through it. And I guess in this context, you know, we talk a lot about revoicing or giving voice, or opening up...

Chloe: Unearthing?

Liz: Unearthing or finding ways, for voices which have been silenced, to come to bring them back, or to try to engage with them. And I think for me, what I love about the idea of audio drama in this context is that it sort of opens up the palettes of how we hear English or other languages spoken. I mean, if we imagine the audio world of the 1940s it brings so much, so much depth and richness how we understand the sound of the Second World War.

Chloe: So how did you direct the writers and makers of what is a huge, huge task, really?

Iqbal: The brief was very broad, and I think we, whilst we're referring to them as audio dramas, I

think they're more an audio experience. And I think that both writers, each in their own way, have really worked with the sound engineer in amazing ways to create these, these, these qualities to their work. And I think that that's something that's, you know, been quite, you know, unprecedented, and the work that I've done over many years in audio drama of. Using the records this, this particular experience has been quite a standout.

Chloe: I'd love to speak to one of these writers so I'm going to ask Sharmila to join me in the studio.

MUSIC TRANSITION

Chloe: Sharmila Chauhan, welcome to the studio, welcome to The National Archives. Thanks for joining me today. Can you say a few words about yourself and your work?

Sharmila Chauhan: Yeah, I'm a playwright and screenwriter. I write a lot about women and the South Asian diaspora, and I'm really interested in power, gender and sexuality.

Chloe: That's great. So interesting. And can you tell me a bit about writing with records alongside, and that moment when you looked at the records.

Sharmila Chauhan: I was really interested in the project because it was a topic that I don't really engage with very much in my own work. So war, violence, anything like that, are things that I really try to avoid and steer clear of. But I was really interested in it because I have worked with archives before and found it really interesting to find a story within loads of seemingly impersonal records, and I had a good feeling that there would be some story that I could unearth that hadn't already been told.

Chloe: And was there one particular record that stood out to you in that initial process?

Sharmila: So when I went into the room, as always, it's always like a lovely space. It's always quiet, and you can, like, smell the paper. And there was this big book of posters, and they look like these glamorous 1950s kind of, although they were made in the 40s, I guess. But that really high glamour, artwork, really beautiful.

Chloe: Very graphic. Yeah, I know exactly what you're talking about, the INF, yeah. Big books, big books.

Sharmila: And the colours, so striking and vivid. But then when I looked at them, I could see that a lot of them were written with sort of Indian script. So there were some in Gujarati, some in what would now be Hindi or Urdu. And I was really interested in that idea, because I had expected them to be in English.

And my understanding of Hindustani is not amazing, but I could definitely pick out specific words that were very sort of poignant and poetic. I could tell it wasn't like a straight formal or type of speech. They had really gone for the poetry and the real depth of emotion in the way that speech was written in Hindustani. And that's the thing that blew my mind. I was like, oh, this speech is a big moment, and could really illustrate the bigger themes around Empire and the way that they related to their Indian troops.

Chloe: It's interesting you said about women being a lens through which you used to write your plays, and you use a woman as your main speaker for understanding. Can you tell me a bit more about that?

Sharmila: I mean, I guess being in the diaspora, one thing that's really stuck in my mind is the idea of Mother India. And there was a massive film way back when called Mother India, which really sort of stayed with me. But the idea of a country being gendered as a woman is really interesting because India has a massive, well, the Hindu side of India has a massive history around goddesses and venerating women in that way. Obviously politically and on the ground, it doesn't always translate, but there is this ideology around womanhood and power and Shakti, which I really relate to and find a very powerful thing in my own writing and in myself. And so I was really interested in the idea of this woman representing Hindustani. And then later on in the piece, because we do look at partition, a female protagonist, worked really well with the idea of birthing these two nations, as it were.

Chloe: And something that's so moving when we're listening to these plays, is that use of sound.

Can you speak a bit more about the use of sound? Yeah, and how that, you know, how you wanted to curate that almost.

Sharmila: The sound was really fun, because I got a chance to be quite playful. And you can move from a surreal, magical place, which is where the story sort of begins, and this birth of this surreal being of Hindustani. And there's Farok, who did the sound engineering, really did some beautiful things in terms of using different instruments from different parts of sort of undivided India and trying to create a resonance and a continuity of sound through the whole piece — that was all his magic.

CLIP - Until my last breath by Sharmila Chauhan

[Until My Last Breath was created in response to Major Tucker's speech WO 169/7529]

Sharmila: But what I was really able to do with the text was be free to travel so from real, real places, real events, kind of, you know, the college, the training of the Army, all of that. And then also going to these, like, really surreal, metaphorical spaces, really easily with sound.

Chloe: And just so effective with the use of water in the play.

Sharmila: Yeah, and again, that's a thing that people really resonate with, this idea of these two rivers that come from different places, communing, and in this, this one place, which I felt really embodied the whole idea of language and how language is formed and how language then also continues.

It is always difficult because you're seeing, you know, what you're reading is from a particular lens. And it's a dispassionate lens, anyway, at best, because it is governmental official records, and often they are devoid of as a writer, you're always looking for the human, the personal, the story beneath the story. So in that way, it's tough. It's also very, very tough and confronting, as a diasporic South Asian person to look at things that you know somewhere your ancestors were affected by, and we were not able to engage in that history in any other way. In a way in the diaspora, I'd have to go back to go back to India, and even then, I think a lot of the records, obviously, are all from a colonial perspective. So it's trying to work with what's there and then go

deeper and sort of, in a way for me, channel what is already in myself as a way to create something new with it.

Chloe: Thank you, Sharmila, you've given us so much to think about, and I think it's really interesting as a listener to get that extra heart and intent behind what you've created. For me, it enhances our understanding of these records, and it informs, I guess, a wider sense of how history in the archive is so much broader when we look above, and how art has such a significant and moving role in that. So thank you for bringing that for us today.

Sharmila: Thank you for having me.

Chloe: The clips you've heard throughout this episode came from the audio dramas produced by Applied Stories for The National Archives.

You can listen to the dramas in full on Soundcloud. We'll link to them in the episode notes, along with other audio drama commissioned by The National Archives.
Chloe: Thanks for listening to On the Record from The National Archives. Please rate and review us where you listen, if you can.

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You can also share your feedback or suggestions for future series by emailing us at OnTheRecord@nationalarchives.gov.uk.

Finally, thank you to all our experts and guests who contributed to this episode. This episode was written, edited, and produced by Tash Walker and Adam Zmith of Aunt Nell, for The National

Archives.

You'll hear from us soon!

Trailer

Chloe Lee:
Think of the soldiers who fought for Britain and the allies in the Second World War and you might think of young lads from Morecambe or officers who attended Sandhurst. You might not be thinking about someone from the coast of East Africa who speaks Swahili, or a Hindustani-speaking person from the country now recognised as India.

Sharmila Chauhan:
So in that way, it's tough. It's also very, very tough and confronting, as a diasporic South Asian person to look at things that you know somewhere your ancestors were affected by.

Chloe: I'm Chloe Lee, a Migration and Citizenship Researcher at The National Archives. I also host our podcast, On the Record at The National Archives, uncovering the past through stories of everyday people.

In this episode of On the Record, I want to dig into a collection of records, held at The National Archives, that are connected to the experiences of the colonial troops. We hold thousands of papers from this history, from speeches of the British generals speaking in Hindustani to bilingual phrase books, and from propaganda magazines to powerful artworks that were intended to make fighting for the empire look like the only moral choice.

Iqbal Singh: And the poetry was really important, and the language that was used in that speech, because it was written in this high register, it was written in quite a flowery text, it reminded me of the poetry that we would sing at home. Some of the words had that poetic quality to them. So yeah, there was an emotional moment. I thought very much about my parents. And even now I

can slightly feel that welling up.

Chloe:
As we approach the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War in 2025, historians here at Kew have started to explore this history in new ways. This includes looking through the multitude of languages through which colonial troops participated in the war and bringing some of those languages to life in audio dramas.

CLIP - Until my last breath by Sharmila Chauhan

Chloe: The episode is coming soon, so hit follow or subscribe wherever you listen.