

Martial Races

Julie LE GAC

ABSTRACT

Martial race theory, which classifies and ranks human groups based on supposedly atavistic warlike qualities, was developed during the second half of the nineteenth century in the aftermath of the Sepoy Rebellion in India. It helped shape representations of masculinity for both colonial and European combatants. While its outlines could vary, martial race theory served as a powerful tool of imperial control that reinforced European domination.



French woman and Sikhs: A French woman pins a flower on the tunic of a Sikh soldier marching past, during the First World War. Source : [Imperial War Museum](#), IWM Q 70214



Subedar: A subedar (equivalent to the British rank of captain) from the 35th Sikh regiment. Watercolor by Major Alfred Crowdy Lovett, 1908, used as an illustration in the famous book by George MacMunn, *Armies of India* (1911).

Source : [National Army Museum](#), NAM. 1953-02-40-1.



Sikh and nurse: A Sikh soldier receives a garland of flowers from a nurse, 1946.

Source : [National Army Museum](#), NAM. 1990-08-65-199.



Group Photo: Soldiers and officers of the 53rd Sikh regiment (Frontier Force), circa 1910. Photograph taken by colonel Charles John Melliss. Source : [National Army Museum](#), NAM. 1967-06-85-10.



Martial Races of India: two Rajput soldiers recruited into the Indian army, United Provinces (India), circa 1944. Source : [National Army Museum](#), Londres, NAM. 1987-07-2-8.



The “martial races” of West Africa, according to the French army during the First World War. Map appearing in *La dépêche coloniale illustrée*, January 1916. Source: *Journal of Contemporary History*, Oct. 1999, vol. 34, no. 4, p. 517-536.

Built in reference to the so-called paragon of virility represented by the European soldier, martial race theory, according to which certain human groups are biologically or culturally predisposed to the art of war, helped shape the masculinity of both colonial and European combatants.

Opportunistic theorizations and recruitment practices

The concept emerged in the eighteenth century within the British army, which sang the praises of warriors from the Scottish Highlands (the Highlanders). In 1857, the Sepoy Rebellion in India, which led to the creation of the British Raj, helped reshape representations of British and Indian masculine identities, and led to the rise of martial race theory. After the uprising, the Sikhs, Marathas, Gurkhas, and Rajputs who had remained loyal to the Crown were presented as chivalrous heroes, while the mutineers—especially the populations from the southern part of the subcontinent—were depicted as cowards whose virility had wilted. These hierarchies, whose outlines could vary, were then codified by recruitment manuals published by officers from the 1890s until the Second World War.

Martial race theory was less formalized outside of the British Empire. Even so, all imperial armies classified dominated populations according to their supposed aptitude for war, and favored the recruitment of particular groups. The Dutch lauded the military qualities of the Ambonese and were more suspicious of the Javanese, even though Javanese were more numerous in the ranks of the Dutch colonial army. The Italian army justified enlisting the Askari of Eritrea during the Libyan conquest by celebrating their innate ability for combat. In the French Empire, officers invoking the differing aptitude for civilization—in contradiction with republican assimilationist discourse praising the unifying model of the *tirailleur* (riflemen)—helped shape distinctions, and favored the

recruitment of North Africans and West Africans to that of Malagasy or Indochinese. On a larger scale, the French emphasized the martial ability of the Bambara and Toucouleur people in French West Africa, and were reluctant to enlist peoples from central Africa; they also contrasted the martial qualities of men from the Moroccan Middle Atlas with the less reliable character of those from Casablanca. These stereotypes reflect the appeal of social Darwinism during the second half of the nineteenth century, which was broadly spread by the press and relevant literature, and appeared in scientific works from anthropologists or doctors. They were sometimes reappropriated by colonized groups themselves, such as the Gurkhas in India and the Ambonese in the Dutch East Indies, who saw military service as a potential source of income and an opportunity for upward mobility.

Gendered hierarchies

Martial races were largely constructs, and often did not match clearly identified ethnic groups. The term Sikh refers to a religion, the notion of a “Berber race” was mostly made up by French colonists, while the martial race of the Ambonese included men from Ambon and other nearby Maluku islands (Kei, Ternate, Halmahera), in addition to Alfurians and Manadonese. A number of criteria were nevertheless invented to give these theories a coherent framework, and to aspire to a certain scientificity. Martial races were based on physical criteria such as size and musculature, as well as on the origin of peoples (British officers highlighted the supposed Aryan ancestry of certain Indian groups). Scrutiny was given to geography, and especially having to contend with a stern climate or mountainous landscape, along with forms of culture: pastoral and hill people were considered intrinsically more martial, while the comfort and temptation of urban environments was deemed to impair the fighting instinct. History was seen as an assurance of martial ability, in particular a past filled with conflict. General Mangin (1866-1925), who heralded the use of the “Force noire” in the French army, believed that “the negro races have remained in the same environment of continual fighting, which has heightened their martial qualities.”

However, it was the values associated with masculinity—courage, endurance, honor, and loyalty—that emerged as the primary determinants. As was the case in India, in the aftermath of the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, the loyalty and Christianity of the Ambonese increased their standing in the eyes of the Dutch. Conversely, in Morocco the French army favored recruitment from tribes that had shown the greatest resistance. These martial hierarchies were combined with gendered hierarchies, based on a spectrum ranging from the denigrated effeminate coward to the brave warrior whose savagery was to be feared. A popular maxim in the French colonial army in North Africa stated that Tunisians fought like women, Algerians like men, and Moroccans like lions. In 1944, a British psychiatrist opposed the virile Sikh and Muslims of Punjab to the “gentler” men of southern India. The populations neglected by recruiters were frequently depicted as effeminate. In 1883, the *Revue militaire de l'étranger* described the Tonkinese as having “skin [...] that is fine and delicate; hair that is black and fairly long [...] tied in a bun with a pin.” Conversely, the so-called absence of a fear of danger—and even ferocity—were often underscored among martial races. “The true Pathan is, perhaps, the most barbaric of all races with which we are brought in contact in the Panjab [sic]. [...] But he is bloodthirsty, cruel, and vindictive in the highest degree,” wrote the British governor Sir Denzil Ibbetson (1847-1908). For their officers, masculinity did not forbid homosexual practices among colonized soldiers, practices which were not morally condemned in the British Indian Army until the 1930s. These different degrees of colonial virility were always constructed in reference to the hegemonic masculinity of European officers. In *Le Feu*, Henri Barbusse (1873-1935) wrote with regard to Senegalese *tirailleurs* (riflemen): “deep down, they are real soldiers. As for us, we are not soldiers, we are men.” Hence the importance ascribed to intelligence and self control. The primitivism often attributed to colonial combatants—along with psychological instability and a tendency to react hysterically—distinguished these warriors’ unsophisticated masculinity from a controlled and restrained virility associated with the European gentleman.

Tools of imperial policy

As a recruiting criterion that varied greatly depending on the context and the need for men, the notion of martial

racism legitimized and regulated forms of imperial control. Comparing dominated peoples with one another, and using some of them to maintain order, allowed European colonizers to “divide and conquer” and to justify their domination. Martial race theory also helped denigrate nationalist adversaries, whose masculinity was brought into question. For example in India in the 1880s, the Bengali Babu—middle-class, educated, seeking upward mobility, and contesting imperial domination—were mocked for their supposedly precious and effeminate character. During the first half of the twentieth century, Irish nationalists were described as being susceptible to their passions and incapable of controlling their emotions, characteristics often associated with women and children. During the struggles of decolonization, denunciation of guerilla tactics as disloyal and cowardly also helped devalue the colonized Other, in the name of a European military-virile model combining loyalty, courage, and strength.

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