

History of World War II: The Dunkirk Evacuation and the Delusions of Empire

'Dunkirk' reinforces Britain's self-image, that it was fighting for freedom all alone in World War II. In not seeing the wider canvas, Britons see a distorted reality

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Global Research, July 28, 2017

[Livemint](#)

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#), [History](#),
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National identities are built on remembered and retold histories. Britain has long viewed the story of its role in World War II as a plucky nation bombed night after night, fighting for freedom all alone with pugnacious determination and Winston Churchill's powerful rhetoric, liberating the continent from Nazi Germany by dragging a reluctant America to the battlefield.

Much of that is true, except the "all alone" part. The reality was more complicated. In *The Raj At War: A People's History Of India's Second World War*, Yasmin Khan showed how the British war effort was collective; it was the British empire that fought the war. Britain indeed suffered enormously, but its defence was vastly boosted by the largest mobilization of a voluntary army, and those soldiers were Indian, and they saw action in Anzio, El Alamein, Tobruk, Monte Cassino, Singapore, Kohima, and Dunkirk.

As audiences flock to see Christopher Nolan's summer blockbuster *Dunkirk*, it is important to remember that it is a film, not history. Nolan hasn't claimed he is making a documentary. But well-made films often shape how history is seen. *Dunkirk* reinforces Britain's self-image. And in not seeing the wider canvas, Britons see a distorted reality, which influences attitudes, and indeed, politics.

To be sure, more than 300,000 British troops were evacuated from Dunkirk, and the number of troops of the Royal Indian Army Service Corps in Dunkirk amounted to a few hundred. But as John Broich, who teaches history at Case Western Reserve University in the US, pointed out recently in *Slate*: "There were also four (Indian) companies ... on those beaches. Observers said they were particularly cool under fire and well organized during the retreat. They weren't large in number ... but their appearance in the film would have provided a good reminder of how utterly central the role of the Indian Army was in the war. Their service meant the difference between victory and defeat. In fact, while Britain and other allies were licking their wounds after Dunkirk, the Indian Army picked up the slack in North Africa and the Middle East."

During the Dunkirk evacuation, John Ashdown, a British army officer, managed to get many of his Indian troops on the last ship before the jetty was bombed. In doing this, he disobeyed an order from one of his superiors to abandon his Indian troops. He was later court-martialled, but the judgement against him was ultimately thrown out, and Ashdown ended

the war as a colonel. Ashdown's son Paddy, who would become a Marine captain and lead the Liberal Democrats in British politics, said in an interview with *The Guardian* in 2000:

“My father thought simply that these were his men, he was responsible for them, and he must bring them back.”



A still from the film Dunkirk (Source: [Metacritic](#))

Such stories are not widely known, and when recounted, they focus on the gallantry of the officer, skip the perfidy of his superior, and the Indian soldiers appear as extras. This makes history monochromatic, and the complex dynamics that the empire created are simplified or glossed over. It contributes to a false narrative about the British empire. A 2014 YouGov poll of 1,741 people across Britain showed that 59% felt that the empire was something to be proud of and only 19% thought it was something to be ashamed of. Almost half the respondents felt that the colonies were better off for being colonized; only 15% felt they were worse off. Not surprisingly, the Harvard academic and empire nostalgist Niall Ferguson tweeted those results, saying, “I won,” because he believes that the empire was, on balance, a good thing for the subjects, when those statistics actually showed how poorly history has been taught in Britain. In this context, Shashi Tharoor's *Inglorious Empire* (published as *An Era Of Darkness*, which I reviewed in *Mint* last year) is a powerful reality check.

Partial reading of British history does a huge disservice to the British people. It buttresses myths, canonizing a leader like Churchill, disregarding the appalling impacts of his conscious actions (such as the Bengal Famine), and it influences contemporary politics because it perpetuates the image of the colonial subjects being the white man's burden.

Consider migration, which has made Britain a livelier, more dynamic country. Seeing immigrants, particularly from the former colonies, as unwelcome foreigners partly contributed to Britain's remarkable self-goal last year—the vote to leave the European Union. The Brexit vote partly showed a yearning among some to return to a time when Britain was not contaminated by outsiders. But as Robert Windler showed in his 2004 book, *Bloody Foreigners*, there was no such time. All you had to do was to look.

There is a section in Salman Rushdie's novel, *The Satanic Verses*, about London being transformed by immigration. It is called “a city visible but unseen”. In an interview then, Rushdie had said that the London Indian community “really was unseen. It was there and

nobody knew it was there. And I was very struck by how often, when one would talk to white English people about what was going on, you could actually take them to these streets and point to these phenomena, and they would somehow still reject this information.”

Britain needs to look again at what it does not see. Its troops did retreat from Dunkirk. But, a few years later, they joined forces with allies of all colours and many nationalities to fight evil. Britain wasn't alone and the allies weren't all white.

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