In retrospect, it is hardly surprising that the massive upheaval which the Second World War wrought in South Asia precipitated the termination of British rule in India. While the movement toward self-rule accelerated through the 1930s, it was the specific events of the war, and their consequences, which shaped the terms on which independence and partition were realized. Through these years, just as it had throughout the colonial period, the imperial military played a key role. The rapid expansion of the Indian Army after the outbreak of war, together with the tumultuous events of the war years themselves, had profound effects on Indian society as well as on the attitudes of those Europeans who served in and with the Indian Army. The war punctured the colonial fiction that only certain classes of ‘Orientals’ were capable of bearing arms: the defeats of 1942, as much as the victories of 1944–5, demonstrated the martial capabilities of Asian troops.  

More concretely, the war exhausted the financial and political capital which underwrote the British Empire in Asia, at the same time as it created new opportunities—as well as plentiful new hardships—for the Raj’s colonial subjects. The massive expansion of recruitment and of war related industries, alongside the economic transformation and demographic shifts which accompanied the war, helped to radically reshape the social and political landscape of late-colonial South Asia. For the Indian Army, and the populations from which it was recruited, these changes were to have profound effects.

An immediate effect of wartime demand for military labour was the exposure of the Indian Army’s anachronistic and restricted recruiting practices. The Martial Race theory, which held that only certain

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segments of the Indian population were capable of bearing arms, hardened during the late nineteenth century rooted in vaguely defined ideas linking race, environment and heredity, the theory continued to shape colonial recruiting until after the outbreak of World War II. The nineteenth century origins of Martial Race theory are now relatively familiar but we know much less about the evolution of the theory during the latter part of colonial rule. Less still is known about the experiences of those ‘martial’ recruits who served colonial power during its waning in the 1930s and 1940s. In part, these historiographical deficiencies reflect the paucity of work on the Indian Army in the late colonial period, a shortfall which is now, thankfully, in the process of being addressed. This chapter seeks to contribute to this literature by exploring how attitudes towards the so called martial races were influenced by the series of economic, strategic and imperial crises which developed during the 1930s and 1940s. The Indian Army was a vital bulwark of the British imperial system and, as the mainstay

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3 In addition to the official histories, most accounts of this period are authored by colonial officers. Though sometimes stylishly executed, these are frequently paternalistic in analysis and explanation. See, for example, J. Masters, Bugles and a Tiger (New York: 1956); J. Masters, The Road Past Mandalay (London: 2002); P. Mason, A Matter of Honour: An Account of the Indian Army, Its Officers and Men (Middlesex: 1976). For official accounts of the Indian Army’s role in the African and Mediterranean campaigns, see The Tiger Strikes (Calcutta: 1942), The Tiger Kills (Calcutta: 1944) and The Tiger Triumphs (Calcutta: 1945). Unfortunately, there is no account of World War II which offers the insight into the experiences of Indian recruits as Omissi’s collection of soldiers’ letters does for WWI. See Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldiers’ Letters, 1914–1918, ed. with an Introduction by D. Omissi (Basingstoke: 1999).

4 Fine accounts of the Indian Army’s role in the Far East are provided in T.R. Moreman, The Jungle, the Japanese and the British Commonwealth Armies at War, 1941–1945: Fighting Methods, Doctrine and Training for Jungle Warfare (Oxon: 2005) and D. Martson, Phoenix from the Ashes: The Indian Army in the Burma Campaign (Westport, CT: 2003). See also D. Marston and C. Sundaram (eds.), A Military History of India and South Asia: From the East India Company to the Nuclear Age (Bloomington: 2008), especially chapters by Sundaram and Marston. Detailed, if rather dated, overviews can be found in C. Chenevix Trench, The Indian Army and the King’s Enemies (London: 1988); J. Gaylor, Sons of John Company: The Indian and Pakistan Armies (Tunbridge Wells: 1992). We still know very little about the effects of decolonization on Anglo-Indian military communities. Despite the martial imagery of the frontpiece, the impact of decolonization on the imperial military is barely touched on in S. Ward (ed.), British Culture and the End of Empire (Manchester: 2001).