



The home front

As Britain declared war on 4 August 1914, Lord Hardinge, the Viceroy of India, announced that India too was at war, without consulting Indian political leaders. Yet, the responses to the war within India, both from the native princes and the political elite, were largely enthusiastic. The two main transnational networks of anti-colonial resistance – the Ghadar party and the Indian Independence Committee in Berlin – had links with the home front but failed to mobilise any large-scale revolutionary uprisings. And barring sporadic food riots, occasional skirmishes and moderate nationalist demands, all seemed relatively quiet on the Indian home front during the war years.

The feudal princes, who still ruled one third of India, were overwhelmingly supportive. They made vast offers of money, troops, labourers, hospital ships, ambulances, motor-cars, flotillas, horses, food and clothes. Kapurthala was one of the first states to pledge its resources while the Maharajah of Bikanir, offering 25,000 men, noted: 'I and my troops are ready to go at once to any place either in Europe or in India or wherever.'¹ The 70-year-old Sir Pertab Singh even vowed to go and sit at the doorstep of the viceroy unless he was allowed to go and fight! Indeed, the princes vied with each other to serve at the front and on 9 September, when the names of those selected by the viceroy for service in Europe – the chiefs of Bikanir, Patiala, Coochbehar, Jodhpur,

Rutlam and Kishengarh, among others – were announced, it caused a sensation in the House of Commons.

Both the Indian National Congress and the All India Muslim League supported the war effort, though there were some protests against the use of Indian Muslim troops in Mesopotamia. But most nationalist leaders, including Annie Besant who set up the Home Rule League in 1916, backed the Allied effort. India's massive war contribution, these moderate nationalists reasoned, could surely be used to demand greater political autonomy. For Besant, the 'King-Emperor will, as reward for her [India's] glorious defence of the Empire, pin upon her breast the jewelled medal of Self-Government within the Empire'. Mahatma Gandhi however demurred. In his autobiography, he notes: 'I thought that England's need should not be turned into our opportunity', and 'it was more becoming and far-sighted not to press our demands while the war lasted'.² In 1917, the secretary of state for India, Edwin Montagu, declared that 'the progressive realisation of responsible government' would be the goal of British government in India but the 1919 Montagu-Chelmsford reforms fell far short of the country's expectations, including that of the moderates.

Within India, a massive propaganda campaign was launched. Fund-raising was organised, meetings were held in cities such as Calcutta, Delhi, Madras, Bombay, and

'The send-off': British officers bid adieu to the Indian troops.

¹ *Speeches of Indian Princes on the World War* (India, 1919).

² Quoted in G.A. Nateson, *All About the War: India Review War Book* (Madras, 1915); M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography; or, The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Harmondsworth, 1982), 317. See S. Das, 'Imperialism, Nationalism and the First World War in India', in Jennifer Keene and Michael Neiberg, eds, *Finding Common Ground* (Leiden, 2011), 67–86.

Home Rule Meeting.
Eager crowds in Madras await the arrival of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, one of the founders of the All India Home Rule League, even as people gather at the Himalayan foothills to recruit or enlist for the imperial cause. Paradoxically, during the war years, the Indian

nationalist movement gathered momentum. In 1916, Tilak, along with the fiery Irish theosophist Annie Besant, set up the Home Rule League, and 200 branches were set up across the country. In 1917, the government of Madras interned Besant, causing a nation wide uproar.



Mule-carts through the Bombay docks where the war 'came home' most immediately. Between 1914 and 1918, over one million troops and non-combatants passed through Bombay docks alone. During the war years, India sent abroad 172,815 animals, including 85,953 horses and 65,398 mules. Herbert Alexander, 9th Mule Corps, remembered the precarious moment of boarding: 'If by any chance the first mule took exception to the gangway, the probability was that all the rest did the same. Sometimes we had almost to carry them on board. ... There was one animal which had evidently made up its mind that it would not take a sea-voyage ... so some of the men hoisted the beast on their shoulders and bore it triumphantly up the gangway and into the hold: that mule literally smiled over the trouble he was giving.'

