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Public lecture

Turbans in the Trenches

Indian soldiers on the Western Front in the First World War

by Shrabani Basu

13 June 2024,
17:30

Department of South Asian,
Tibetan and Buddhist Studies,
seminar room 1
Spitalgasse 2,
Hof 2.7, 1090 Vienna



Shrabani Basu:

“Turbans in the Trenches: Indian soldiers on the Western Front in the First World War”

A public lecture as part of the workshop “Sounds, Literature and Images: Indian Experience in the First World War”.

Nearly one and a half million Indian soldiers fought for the British in the First World War. They travelled from remote villages in India to the harsh trenches of Flanders and France, for a war that was not of their making. Yet they fought with unquestioning valour and went on to win the highest bravery awards. They were the largest force from the colonies, but their contribution has been mostly forgotten.

Shrabani Basu delves into narratives buried in villages in India and Pakistan, as well as British archives, to recreate the War through the eyes of the Indians. She tells, for the first time, the personal stories of some of these Indians who went to the Western Front: from a grand turbaned Maharaja who fought for Empire to the peasant from Garhwal who was awarded the Victoria Cross; from the cooks and sweepers who accompanied the troops to the dashing young pilots who brought down German planes. She tells the untold story of how curries reached the frontline, how Muslims soldiers prayed to Mecca in the fields of France, and how bonds were forged in the mud and blood of the battle fields.



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