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Uncovering Hidden Narratives Of The Kohima War: Psychological Insights From 1944

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Abstract: The Battle of Kohima, a decisive turning point in the Burma Campaign during the Second World War, is often remembered for its military strategies and geopolitical significance. This study, however, shifts the focus to the human dimension, examining the psychological warfare, power dynamics, and socio-cultural implications experienced by British, Indian, and Japanese soldiers, as well as the Naga¹ people. Through a micro-historical analysis of primary accounts, it uncovers the psychological toll of war, hierarchical oppression, and shifting loyalties shaped by cultural and historical contexts. By exploring the use of propaganda, emotional trauma, and survival strategies, this paper provides a nuanced understanding of the conflict's impact on individuals and communities. It highlights the ways wartime power structures influenced both personal and collective experiences, offering insights into the resilience and agency of those caught in the throes of war. The study underscores the importance of documenting these narratives to deepen historical discourse and honour the human spirit's endurance in the face of adversity.

Keywords: Battle of Kohima, Japanese invasion of Nagaland, World War II, Naga people, British and Indian soldiers, Japanese soldiers, cultural assimilation, forced labour, psychological warfare, Bushido code, resilience and adaptability, and human cost of war.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Battle of Kohima, fought during World War II, holds a significant place in the history of Indian military and serves as a testament to the courage and resilience of both Indian and British forces. It took place from April 4 to June 22, 1944, in the picturesque hills of Nagaland in north-eastern India, the battle marked a crucial turning point in the Burma Campaign and the overall war in the Far East. Kohima, a small town located in the north-eastern state of Nagaland in India, became the stage for a fierce and prolonged confrontation between the Allied forces, primarily composed of British and Indian troops, and the Japanese Imperial Army. The battle was a part

¹ Indigenous people of the Nagaland state in India.

of the larger campaign to halt the Japanese advance into India and ultimately secure the region from enemy occupation.

The Japanese forces, led by General Renya Mutaguchi, sought to capture Kohima and cut off the crucial supply lines of the Allied forces. However, the allied forces, under the command of British Lieutenant General William Slim and Brigadier Frank Messervy, launched a fierce resistance and held their ground tenaciously. The battle unfolded in a series of intense engagements, with both sides displaying extraordinary valour and strategic acumen. The outcome of the battle of Kohima was a decisive victory for the Allied forces. The successful defence of Kohima not only halted the Japanese advance but also boosted the morale of the Allied troops and dealt a severe blow to the Japanese forces in the region. It marked a significant turning point in the Burma Campaign, leading to subsequent Allied offensives and eventual victory in the war.

In the context of the 1940s, the Battle of Kohima emerged as a pivotal event that not only altered the course of World War II but also had significant implications for our history. Referred to by authors such as Martin Dougherty and Jonathan Ritter as the “Stalingrad of the East,” this battle marked a decisive turning point in the Japanese U-Go offensive into India during 1944.² Military historian Robert Lyman acknowledged its profound impact, stating that Kohima and Imphal changed the course of the Second World War in Asia, dealing a significant blow to the Japanese forces from which they never fully recovered.³

Despite its historical significance, discussions of the 1940s in India often prioritize the narrative of national freedom, overshadowing the critical role played by the Battle of Kohima. Existing historiography on the subject, primarily explored by military historians, tends to focus on military strategies, troop movements, and geopolitical dynamics. However, it is essential to recognize that within the framework of this intense conflict, it was the soldiers from both sides and the Naga people who bore the brunt of violence, displacement, and loss. Their experiences and perspectives have often been analysed to support their military analysis in previous studies.

My interest in delving into this topic stems from the recognition of the central role these actors played in the conflict and the need to shed light on their perspectives. Rather than studying their experiences solely within the context of military history, my intention is to explore the psychological implications inherent in their involvement. By examining their narratives, we can gain valuable insights into the broader psychological effects of armed conflict, including the psychological toll, trauma, shifting perceptions, and power dynamics at play.

Understanding the psychological implications of the Battle of Kohima and considering the perspectives of the soldiers and Naga people is of utmost importance. It allows us to grasp the human experience in war and the multifaceted impacts it has on individuals and societies. By analyzing these psychological dimensions, we can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of historical events, their far-reaching consequences.

In this article, using a combination of primary and secondary sources, my focus will be on exploring two key aspects to understand the psychological implications of war within the context of the Naga people and soldiers from both sides.

² Robert Lyman, *Kohima 1944: The Battle That Saved India*. 1st ed. Osprey Publishing, 2010, p. 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 3.

II. REVEALING NEGLECTED NARRATIVES: EXPLORING PSYCHOLOGICAL REALM

2.1 Exploring Power Dynamics

A micro-historical analysis of the experiences of the Naga people and soldiers during the Japanese invasion of Nagaland provides valuable insights into the power dynamics and systems of oppression embedded in wartime contexts.



Image 1: Japanese soldiers begging for food drawn by RKCS: Rajkumar Chandrajitsana Singh (Source - RKCS Art Gallery)

Both British and Japanese soldiers encountered severe challenges and hierarchies during their respective military campaigns. Japanese soldiers, particularly those in the jungles of Nagaland, faced immense difficulties. They struggled to survive on limited rations and often had to resort to eating raw rice for extended periods, resulting in malnutrition and diseases. Probationary account officer Masao Hirakubo of the 3rd Battalion, 58th Infantry Regiment mentioned these hardships in his accounts.⁴ These adverse conditions not only had detrimental effects on their physical health but also had significant psychological implications. The soldiers had to cope with the hardships and the toll it took on their morale and mental resilience.

The hierarchical structure within the Japanese army also played a significant role in shaping the psychological experiences of the soldiers during the invasion of Kohima. Captain Shosaku Kameyama's (3rd battalion, 58 Infantry regiment, 31st division) account highlights the challenges and conflicts that arose from this strict hierarchy.⁵

The clear chain of command within the Japanese army established a system where superiors held the ultimate authority in determining the actions and strategies employed on the battlefield. Major Nagata's position as the battalion commander granted him the power to override the decisions made by subordinate officers, such as Captain Kameyama. In the specific instance during a battle near Kohima village, Captain Kameyama's recommendation to retreat was disregarded by Major Nagata, demonstrating the limited influence and agency of subordinate soldiers in strategic decision-making. This imbalance of power and control could have various psychological implications for the soldiers. Firstly, it could lead to feelings of frustration and powerlessness. Being unable to contribute their insights, ideas, or opinions in decision-making processes may create a sense of being voiceless and disregarded. The soldiers may perceive that their individual capabilities and expertise are undervalued, leading to a loss of motivation and morale. Moreover, the lack of control over their own actions

⁴ Kazuo Tamayama and John Nunneley, *Tales by Japanese soldiers of the Burma Campaign 1942-1945* (London: New York: Cassell, 2000), N 940.548252 T153, Copy: hbk, in National Library of Australia, p. 171.

⁵ *Ibid.* 156.

and the reliance on superiors for guidance and direction can contribute to a diminished sense of autonomy. Soldiers may feel constrained and restricted in their decision-making capabilities, leading to a loss of personal agency. Moreover, Staff Sergeant Yasumasa Nishiji's accounts reveal the harrowing conditions faced by Japanese soldiers during the retreat from Imphal and Kohima.⁶ Soldiers experienced exhaustion, physical ailments, and despair, leading some to consider suicide. His narrative emphasizes the profound physical and psychological toll that war exacts on individuals. Despite orders to the contrary, the soldiers felt compelled to assist their dying friends, driven by loyalty. However, their efforts were often in vain, and they could not save everyone. Instances arose where comrades, unable to bear the suffering any longer, chose to end their own lives to spare their unit the burden. The scenes of "Double Suicides" emerge in the narratives, where soldiers would embrace each other and place a grenade between them as an act of shared despair.



Image 2: A drawing highlighting Double Suicides drawn by Staff Sergeant Yasumasa Nishiji (Source— Tales by Japanese Soldiers by Kazuo Tamayama)

This act alludes to the historical and cultural context of the soldiers' experiences. Additionally, there are accounts of soldiers snatching water from dying comrades, possibly for survival. These accounts shed light on the extreme conditions and emotional toll experienced by Japanese soldiers during the retreat from Imphal and Kohima, revealing the complex moral dilemmas, despair, and resilience exhibited in the face of unimaginable hardship and suffering.

Similarly, British soldiers, led by General William Slim, faced their own set of challenges and hierarchies. Slim, in his account, acknowledges the difficult conditions endured by his troops during the Battle of Kohima.⁷ The soldiers faced extreme heat, monsoons, and scarce resources. They were constantly under threat from enemy fire and endured physical and emotional strain. The hierarchical structure within the British army also played a role, as the decision-making power was concentrated at the top, often leaving lower-ranking soldiers with limited agency in strategic decisions. These conditions and hierarchies contributed to the psychological pressures faced by the soldiers, influencing their decision-making and actions on the battlefield.⁸

Moreover, Slim also discussed that the Japanese employed psychological warfare tactics that had a significant impact on the psychological stress experienced by the British soldiers. One such tactic was the use of Japanese snipers, who terrorized the British and Indian troops. These snipers would tie themselves to the topmost branches of trees on GPT Ridge, strategically positioning themselves to target the slopes of DIS and FSD hills. By doing so, they created a constant threat, instilling fear and anxiety in the defenders. The presence of these hidden snipers, combined with their ability to strike at any moment, intensified the psychological pressure faced by the British soldiers, who had to constantly be on guard and remain hyper-vigilant.

⁶ Ibid. 196.

⁷ Field Marshal the Viscount Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, (Cassell, 1962), in Lee Kong Chian Reference Library Level 11, Reference Southeast Asia, call number 940.5425 SLI –[WAR], National Library Board, Singapore, p. 45.

⁸ Ibid. 46.



Image 3: FSD hills on Kohima ridge where some of the fiercest fighting of the battle took place. The trees are hung with the remains of parachutes from air supply drops. MH 3082, Imperial War Museums.

In addition to the snipers, the Japanese also employed loudspeakers as a means of psychological warfare. These loudspeakers were used to appeal directly to the Indian troops, urging them to forsake their British units and switch sides to join the Japanese. By targeting the loyalty and allegiance of the Indian soldiers, the Japanese aimed to weaken the resolve and loyalty within the British ranks. This tactic created a sense of uncertainty and psychological strain among the British troops, as they had to confront the possibility of betrayal from their own ranks.⁹ The constant exposure to these appeals through the loudspeakers further exacerbated the psychological stress experienced by the soldiers, adding to their already challenging circumstances on the battlefield.



Image 4 : Allies capture Kohima, (British troops wait watchfully in a well-constructed bunker in one of the Kohima battle areas. A sign of the obvious tension of the moment is that the men have not removed their steel helmets), IND 3486, Imperial War Museums.

⁹ Joyce C. Lebra, *Japanese Trained Armies in Southeast Asia*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010, p. 105.

The use of psychological warfare by the Japanese was a deliberate strategy to exploit the psychological vulnerabilities of the British soldiers. By instilling fear, doubt, and the temptation of defection, the Japanese sought to undermine the mental and emotional resilience of the British troops. Another notable tactic used by Japanese is the use of leaflets. One such leaflet specifically targeted English soldiers, urging them to give up resistance and surrender to the Japanese. The leaflet sought to exploit the soldiers' emotional connections to their families and appealed to their sense of duty and responsibility towards their loved ones. By emphasizing that their families were waiting for them, the leaflet aimed to create a sense of doubt and anxiety among the soldiers, questioning the purpose and futility of their continued resistance. The message conveyed in the leaflet suggested that surrendering to the Japanese would not result in harm or death but rather implied a promise of safety and protection. By projecting a less threatening image of the Japanese forces, the leaflet aimed to weaken the resolve of the English soldiers and encourage them to abandon their resistance.

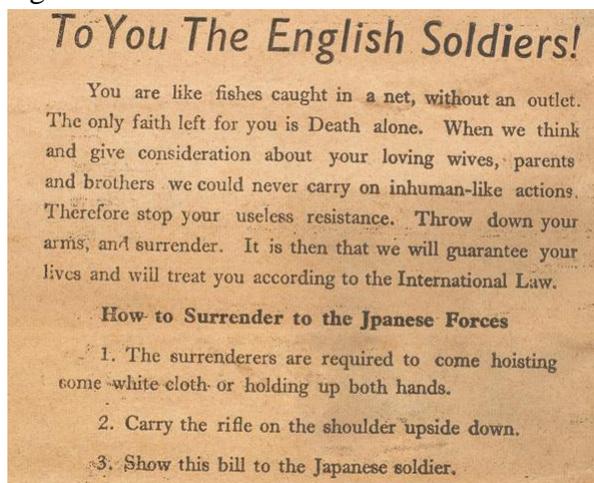


Image 5: Japanese surrender leaflet dropped on the Kohima defenders, 1944, National Army Museum, London.

This form of psychological warfare aimed to exploit the soldiers' vulnerabilities, playing on their personal connections and emotional ties. By appealing to their desire to protect and reunite with their families, the leaflet sought to sow seeds of doubt and disillusionment among the soldiers, ultimately hoping to break their will to fight and facilitate a surrender to the Japanese. The psychological stress caused by these tactics would have further eroded the soldiers' morale, confidence, and overall psychological well-being, making their already difficult task of defending against the enemy even more challenging.

Thus, the torrential rain, thick jungle, hunger, disease, military hierarchy and other such things took a toll on both British and Japanese soldiers. The hierarchical structures within the Japanese and British armies demonstrate the ways in which power operates through the concentration of decision-making authority and the limitation of agency for subordinate soldiers. The use of psychological tactics demonstrates how power operates not only through physical force but also through strategies that manipulate the minds and emotions of the enemy.

The people of Naga Tribes also saw the brutality of the war, the memories of Heozutou Sing-Rau, a Naga civilian, who was approximately 12 years old during the Japanese occupation, vividly depict the devastating bombings executed by the British forces.¹⁰ As a result of the intense bombing, numerous houses were destroyed. This first-hand experience shed light on the arduous and demanding circumstances endured by the local population, as they constantly lived under the threat of violence and grappled with the profound impact of warfare on their immediate environment.

During the Japanese occupation, the villagers experienced many difficulties. Besuwei Suurow says, "As a young teenager during that time, I was assigned the task of collecting hay for the Japanese forces. While we received a small payment for our work, the physical demands of the job were quite challenging. It was a harsh reality that we had to face, living under the occupation. Despite the meagre compensation, the laborious tasks

¹⁰ Battle of Kohima 1944 WW2 – A Naga Peoples' perspective, Produced by the Kohima Educational Trust KET, and Edited by Highland Dawn Media, Kohima, Nagaland.

we were entrusted with served as a constant reminder of the difficulties and hardships imposed upon us by the occupying forces.”¹¹ Moreover, the confiscation of their food crops caused additional hardship for the villagers, making their struggles even more challenging.

Besuwei Suurow also mentioned that the behaviour of the Japanese soldiers changed over time.¹² Initially, they seemed polite, but gradually, they started engaging in more troubling actions. They would kill cattle and regularly slaughter pigs. The villagers faced threats, violence, forced labour, and the confiscation of their food supplies. These accounts reveal the difficult and oppressive conditions imposed by the Japanese forces, providing insight into the extent of the hardships endured by the local population.

Furthermore, it is crucial to acknowledge the role played by the British forces and their scorched-earth policy. In their efforts to counter the Japanese invasion, the British resorted to burning Naga villages along their path. Siu, a Naga civilian who witnessed this, recalls his village being completely destroyed, as also mentioned in the book “The March on Delhi” by AJ Barker.¹³

Image 6 : Part of Naga Village after the battle, showing the ferocity of the fighting. This was the site of 5th



Brigade’s struggle for Naga Hill (Ind 3709, Imperial War Museums)

According to Barker’s account, this scorched-earth policy resulted in the indiscriminate destruction of homes and infrastructure, leaving behind a trail of ashes and ruins. The deliberate burning of Naga villages was intended to deny the Japanese forces any resources or shelter, but it had a profound impact on the local communities.¹⁴

The widespread destruction of homes and the forced displacement of the villagers had a deep and lasting impact on the local communities. The villages, once vibrant and inhabited, were reduced to charred remains, uprooting families from their ancestral lands. This strategy further disrupted the lives of the Naga people, making them more vulnerable and intensifying the overall sense of oppression they experienced during the war.

Despite the numerous challenges they faced, the villagers demonstrated remarkable resilience and defiance in their interactions with the Japanese forces. Ketsuo Piena, who was around 30 years old when the Japanese arrived in his village in Chagasang site, exemplified this spirit. He says, “Our village community displayed remarkable resilience and resourcefulness during those challenging times. In order to safeguard ourselves, we took proactive measures by constructing defensive perimeters, which included fences and pungies, around our villages. These defensive measures were reminiscent of ancient times, when similar strategies were employed during periods of war. It was a testament to our determination to protect our homes and maintain a sense of security amidst the turmoil of the occupation.”¹⁵

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ A. J. Barker, *The March on Delhi*. Faber & Faber, 1963, shelf 954.0359K32, Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, p. 25.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ *Battle of Kohima 1944 WW2 – A Naga Peoples’ perspective*, Produced By the Kohima Educational Trust KET, and Edited by Highland Dawn Media, Kohima, Nagaland.

However, the actions of the Japanese forces revealed the power dynamics at play and the severe impact of the occupation on the local population. The ruthlessness displayed by the Japanese, such as cutting down everything in their path with swords, underscored the extent to which the occupying forces exerted control over the lives and resources of the villagers. This demonstration of brute force is indicative of disciplinary power, where the occupying forces employ violent and oppressive measures to assert their authority and dominance over the local population. Foucault's notion of disciplinary power emphasizes the use of techniques and mechanisms of control to mould and discipline individuals and communities, aligning with the experiences of the Naga people who faced violence, forced labour, and displacement.

However, it is important to note that despite the difficulties faced by British and Japanese soldiers, the Naga people held much lesser power and were more vulnerable to violence from both sides. The Naga people, as a marginalized community, lacked the military might and resources available to the invading forces. They found themselves caught in the crossfire between the British and Japanese armies, experiencing violence, forced labour, and displacement.

Thus, the power dynamics between the occupying forces and the Naga people placed the latter in a position of subjugation. The Naga people, already marginalized within the colonial framework, were further marginalized in the context of war. Their limited access to resources and representation made them more susceptible to violence and exploitation. They lacked the agency to influence the course of events and had to navigate through the complexities of power imposed upon them.

2.2 Social Structures and Systems of Oppression

During wartime, the social structures that existed not only shaped power dynamics but also had profound psychological implications for individuals and communities involved. The hierarchical organization of the British and Japanese armies, with officers holding authoritative positions, extended beyond military operations and influenced the treatment of soldiers and local populations. This hierarchical structure and its psychological impact can be observed in the experiences of the Naga people during the Japanese invasion of Nagaland.

The Japanese forces employed various mechanisms of oppression to assert control over Naga people. Cultural assimilation was one such method, as the Japanese aimed to reshape the identity and worldview of the Naga people. Bukohou, a Naga civilian who was studying in third grade when the war broke out, provides insight into the psychological impact of cultural assimilation during the Japanese occupation. He recounts the conversion of the Baptist church into a Japanese school, where the Naga children were taught basic subjects and cultural values.¹⁶ By converting the Baptist church into a Japanese school, the Japanese sought to instill their own beliefs and practices. The fact that the Japanese referred to themselves as “Kohima Master” raises questions about the psychological consequences of such assimilation, including the erosion of cultural identity and the internal conflicts that arise from adopting unfamiliar beliefs and practices.¹⁷

Economic exploitation was another method employed by Japanese forces to oppress the Naga people. Vingotsu-re-katsu recalls the experience of carrying paddy three times to Visemom village for the Japanese, expressing his suppressed anger when the Japanese would take his food stock as they pleased.¹⁸ He also mentions the hurt he felt when the Japanese fed his entire standing crop to the horses. Engaging in such tasks under duress can lead to feelings of powerlessness, frustration, and a loss of control over one's own life. The economic

¹⁶ Batt Implementation le of Kohima 1944 WW2 – A Naga Peoples' perspective, Produced By the Kohima Educational Trust KET, and Edited by Highland Dawn Media, Kohima, Nagaland.

¹⁷ Charles Chasie, and Harry Fecitt. The Road to Kohima: The Naga Experience in the Second World War. Norway Barkweaver Publications 2017, NASSDOC Library, 940.53089149 CHA-R, Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), p. 38.

¹⁸ Battle of Kohima 1944 WW2 – A Naga Peoples' perspective, Produced By the Kohima Educational Trust KET, and Edited by Highland Dawn Media, Kohima, Nagaland.

exploitation by the occupying forces can also result in a sense of psychological subjugation and a diminished sense of agency.

In addition to this, Japanese also manipulated the currency and introduced a foreign monetary system. The of a financial system by the Japanese, including the printing of war currency, also provides further insights into the psychological aspects of economic control. As mentioned by Bukohou, various denominations such as 50 paise, rupees 1, 2, 5, and 10 were printed.¹⁹ Additionally, residents of Visemom village claim that Japanese war money was even printed in their own houses. This manipulation of currency and economic policies has significant psychological implications.

The introduction of a foreign monetary system, coupled with the uncertainty and instability it brings, generated economic anxieties and distress among the local population. The reliance on this foreign currency undermines the sense of economic autonomy and creates a heightened sense of vulnerability. Individuals and communities may experience a loss of control over their economic well-being and face difficulties in navigating and adapting to the new financial landscape. Thus, the control over the monetary system allows the Japanese to regulate and influence the economic lives of the Naga people, further reinforcing their power and control over the population.

On the other hand, the mention of collecting rations provided by the British sheds light on the psychological impact of dependency and resource distribution as exemplified by Vime-do-Rutsa who was about 14 or 15 years and he used to herd cattle, he remembers that they used to go down to the Zaza river to collect our rations which the British provided.²⁰ By supplying essential resources, the British created a relationship of dependence, wherein the local population relied on external support for their sustenance. This reliance on external supplies could generate feelings of gratitude and indebtedness towards the colonial administration. At the same time, it fostered a sense of dependency on external forces, potentially diminishing self-sufficiency and self-determination among the local population.

The psychological implications of these power dynamics and systems of oppression were profound. For the soldiers, the harsh conditions, hierarchies, and challenges they faced had significant psychological effects. They grappled with physical and emotional strains, moral dilemmas, and the complexities of war. These experiences shaped their perceptions, decision-making, and actions on the battlefield.

For the Naga people, the psychological implications were equally profound. They endured the trauma of violence, displacement, exploitation and even had to migrate. The power dynamics imposed upon them influenced their sense of identity, agency, and well-being. The vulnerability they faced due to their limited power made them more susceptible to the psychological impact of the conflict. The enduring psychological scars left by the war continue to shape the Naga people's collective memory and resilience.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.



Image 7 and 8: Naga refugees at Ukhrul, Manipur, India. (Source – ABY 25, Imperial War Museums)

Overall, a micro-historical analysis of the experiences of the Naga people and soldiers during the Japanese invasion of Nagaland reveals the power dynamics and systems of oppression inherent in wartime contexts. By examining the specific experiences of British and Japanese soldiers, as well as the vulnerabilities of the Naga people, we gain a comprehensive understanding of the social structures and psychological implications at play. The hierarchies, challenges, and psychological pressures faced by the soldiers, along with the vulnerabilities and subjugation of the Naga people, shed light on the complexities of power, oppression, and the human psyche within the context of wartime experiences.

2.3 Different Ideologies and Shifting Perceptions

The experiences of both the Naga people and the Japanese soldiers during the invasion had a profound impact on their perceptions and understandings of war, subsequently influencing their actions and decisions. These experiences are intricately linked to the psychological implications of their involvement in the conflict.

For the Naga people, their historical context of British colonialism in Naga country played a significant role in shaping their perceptions or Subjectivity of the war. The British presence and their mobilization of Nagas into the labour corps during the First World War exposed them to the realities of war and the sacrifices associated with it. They employed various techniques of control and power to subjugate and exploit the Nagas, which influenced their perceptions of war and their understanding of power dynamics. This experience likely had a lasting psychological impact, shaping their understanding of war as a destructive and traumatic event.

During the outbreak of the Second World War, the Nagas found themselves in a complex situation. The invading Japanese forces propagated the idea of a shared race with the Nagas and promised liberation from British colonial rule. This message resonated with some Nagas who harboured resentment towards British domination. Siu, a Naga civilian, recalls the anticipation among village leaders for the Japanese arrival, fuelled by rumours of their potential to drive out the British and grant independence to the Nagas. Siu mentions, “When the Japanese came, they said we were all Mongoloid people and requested our help. Some Nagas also said the Japanese were our elder brothers. So I used to help the Japanese.”²¹ Thus the promise of liberation from British rule by the Japanese resonated with the Naga subjectivity of resistance and autonomy, leading some Nagas to temporarily align themselves with the invading forces.

²¹ Battle of Kohima 1944 WW2 – A Naga Peoples’ perspective, Produced By the Kohima Educational Trust KET, and Edited by Highland Dawn Media, Kohima, Nagaland.

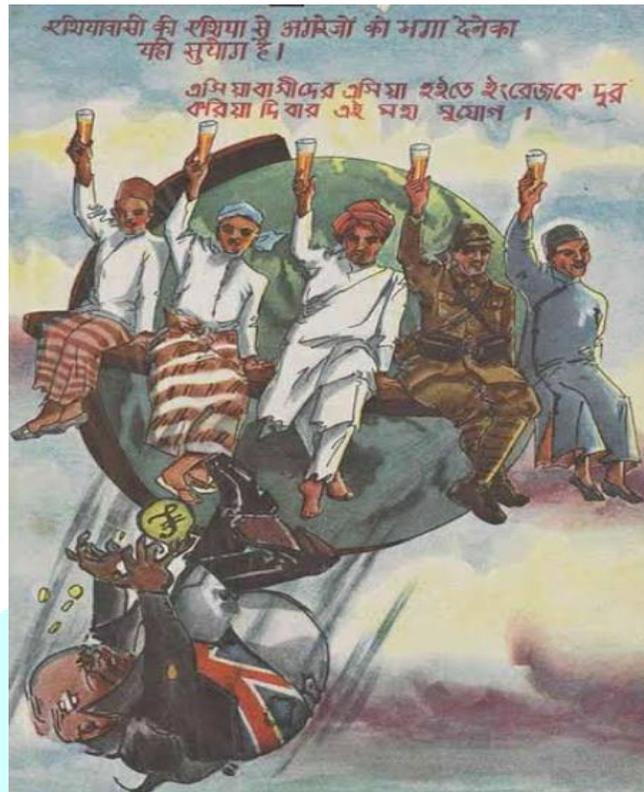


Image 9: Five Asian men, including a Japanese soldier, raise a toast together, suggesting that all Asians can live in harmony. The text on the poster reads, “This is an appropriate occasion to drive out the English from Asia.”, National Army Museum, London.

Motivated by the desire for freedom, a faction of Nagas initially aligned themselves with the Japanese forces, illustrating a psychological response to their experiences under British colonialism. The promise of liberation from a long-standing oppressive rule resonated with those who sought independence and autonomy. The belief in a shared identity and the perception of the Japanese as elder brothers fostered a sense of camaraderie and cooperation between some Nagas and the invading forces.²²

These initial alliances and cordial relations with the Japanese were influenced by the psychological impact of British colonialism on the Nagas. The memories of British domination and the hope for self-determination influenced the response of certain Nagas, leading them to temporarily align themselves with the Japanese in their pursuit of freedom. It highlights the complex interplay of psychological factors, historical circumstances, and the quest for autonomy that shaped the choices made by some Nagas during this period.

²² Fergal Keane, *Road of Bones: The Epic Siege of Kohima 1944*. Illustrated, reprint, HarperPress, 2011, p. 62.

The Nagas' alliance with the Japanese, unfortunately, did not yield the anticipated freedom. Instead, they faced mistreatment and harsh conditions under Japanese rule. This led many Nagas to reassess their allegiance and ultimately switch sides once again, aligning with the British forces against the Japanese. Hamoto, a civilian, recounts the Nagas' continued support for the British despite their villages being targeted by British bombs.²³ He mentions how Nagas served as soldiers, stretcher-bearers, informers, scouts, porters, and more, aiding the British in their operations against the Japanese. Hamoto's father, for instance, provided valuable information about the Japanese army's movements, which was then used to coordinate bombing missions on Japanese positions. Thus, the experiences of mistreatment and harsh conditions under Japanese rule challenged and reshaped the Naga subjectivity. The Naga people reassessed their allegiance and ultimately switched sides, aligning with the British



Image 10: A Naga road-building gang, 1944. The Nagas were enthusiastic allies of the British, rallied by their Gaonburas (village leaders) under the leadership of Charles Pawsey, the British Deputy Commissioner who lived on Garrison Hill throughout the siege. Nagas served not only as labourers, however, with many fighting directly against the Japanese. (Imperial War Museums, Ind 3658)

forces. This shift demonstrates how power relations, government strategies, and subjectivity were in constant flux, as the Naga subjectivity of resistance and autonomy adjusted to the changing circumstances and the realities of the Japanese occupation.

The shifting loyalties and alliances of the Nagas during the invasion highlight the complex interplay between their experiences, perceptions, and decision-making. The psychological implications are evident in the way their perceptions of war were shaped by their experiences under British colonialism and their subsequent disillusionment with the Japanese occupiers. It is likely that the Nagas' experiences during the invasion profoundly influenced their understanding of war as a tool of power and control. The betrayal and mistreatment they encountered from both sides may have engendered a sense of mistrust and skepticism towards external forces. These experiences would have had a significant impact on their subsequent actions and decisions during the conflict.

²³ Battle of Kohima 1944 WW2 – A Naga Peoples' perspective, Produced By the Kohima Educational Trust KET, and Edited by Highland Dawn Media, Kohima, Nagaland.

In the case of the Japanese soldiers, their mind-set was deeply rooted in the Bushido code, which emphasized honour, sacrifice, and duty.²⁴ The military regime effectively employed this code to motivate and control its soldiers. However, as the war progressed and Japan faced increasing losses, practical considerations and the desire for survival began to challenge and reshape their subjectivity. This shift can be seen in an incident involving General Mutagachi, Commander Kawabe and Kotoku Sato, as recounted by Sub-Lieutenant Hiroshi Yoshido from the 13th Naval Base headquarters. General Mutagachi, bound by the rigid adherence to the code of Bushido, could not bring himself to issue the order to retreat despite the dire situation. He expected Commander Kawabe to read his facial expressions and discern his intentions.²⁵ This incident reflects the traditional expectation that leaders in the samurai tradition exhibit strong resolve and communicate non-verbally. However, Sato's bold decision to retreat his soldiers back to Burma, even without a direct order, signalled a departure from traditional adherence to Bushido.

Individual soldiers faced internal conflicts between their sense of duty and the desire to survive. Some soldiers questioned the practicality and efficacy of sacrificing their lives when victory seemed increasingly unlikely. These internal struggles and the erosion of morale among the Japanese forces led to a gradual shift in their perceptions and actions, as survival and practicality began to overshadow traditional values.

The change in perception and psychology during wartime can be attributed to various factors, including the recognition of the changing nature of warfare, the practical considerations of preserving lives and resources, and the increasing influence of modern military strategies. As the war progressed and Japan faced mounting losses and diminishing prospects for victory, practicality and survival took precedence over strict adherence to ancient codes.

The experiences of the British soldiers during the invasion also had a significant impact on their perceptions and understandings of war. Field Marshal Slim, in particular, faced immense psychological pressures as a commander. In the case of General Slim, he talks about his role as a commander during the Battle of Kohima placed a tremendous weight of responsibility on his shoulders.²⁶ The strategic decision-making process was influenced by the psychological pressures he faced. Slim's emotional bond with his troops adds another layer of complexities. The emotional connection between a leader and their subordinates can influence decision-making and actions. Slim's deep care for the well-being of his men created an emotional burden that influenced his decision-making and actions. He sought to protect his soldiers and achieve the mission's objectives, considering factors such as enemy movements, available resources, and the overall campaign objectives.²⁷ This emotional dimension demonstrates how power operates not only through formal authority but also through affective ties and emotional management.

Additionally, Slim discusses the moral dilemmas encountered by the British soldiers. Engaging in close-quarter combat with the enemy often led to intense and brutal fighting, forcing the soldiers to navigate the ethical considerations of taking enemy lives while preserving their own. These moral complexities influenced their perceptions of war and had psychological implications, as they had to reconcile the necessity of violence with their own values and sense of humanity. The subjectivities of the soldiers were shaped by these moral dilemmas, reflecting the individual negotiation of power relations and the internalization of moral discourses within the context of war.

In addition to the challenges faced within the British army, Indian soldiers fighting against the Japanese forces experienced complex psychological dynamics. Some Indian soldiers perceived the conflict as a fight

²⁴ Bushido is a term that refers to the code of conduct followed by the samurai, the warrior class in feudal Japan. It can be translated as "the way of the warrior" or "the warrior's code." Bushido encompassed a set of values, principles, and ethical guidelines that governed the behaviour and mindset of samurai warriors.

²⁵ Kazuo Tamayama and John Nunneley, *Tales by Japanese soldiers of the Burma Campaign 1942-1945* (London: New York: Cassell, 2000), N 940.548252 T153, Copy: hbk, in National Library of Australia, p. 192.

²⁶ Field Marshal the Viscount Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, (Cassell, 1962), in Lee Kong Chian Reference Library Level 11, Reference Southeast Asia, call number 940.5425 SLI-[WAR], National Library Board, Singapore, p. 102.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

against foreign invaders and were driven by the motivation to defend their homeland. This sense of patriotism and commitment to the nation was actively promoted by the colonial authorities.

However, there were also Indian soldiers who saw the conflict as an opportunity to resist British colonialism. They recognized the irony of fighting for their country's independence while serving under the same colonial system they sought to overthrow. This complexity demonstrates how power relations and colonial structures influenced their understanding of the war and influenced their actions and decisions.²⁸ The juxtaposition of fighting against the Japanese invaders while simultaneously challenging oppressive British rule adds complexity to their position. They grappled with conflicting loyalties and allegiances, navigating the complexities of the war and their aspirations for independence.

In this context, the Indian Independence League, led by Subhash Chandra Bose, played a significant role in influencing the perceptions and actions of Indian soldiers in the British army. Bose's organization sought to mobilize Indian soldiers and encourage them to embrace the cause of Indian independence. The Indian Independence League provided a platform for these soldiers to express their discontent with British colonialism and to actively work towards achieving freedom for their nation. Through propaganda, ideological messaging, and organizational efforts, the Indian Independence League aimed to change the perceptions of Indian soldiers, emphasizing the possibility of an alternative future outside of British rule.

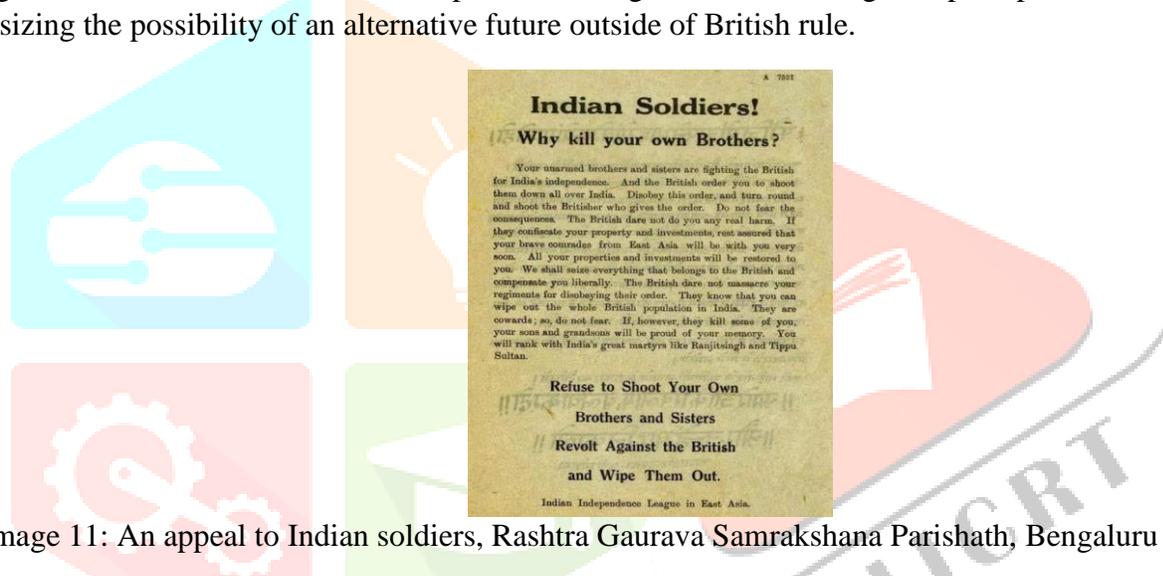


Image 11: An appeal to Indian soldiers, Rashtra Gaurava Samrakshana Parishath, Bengaluru 560098.

Furthermore, Discrimination was a significant issue faced by Indian soldiers, leading to frustration and resentment. They experienced racial discrimination, unequal treatment, and limited opportunities for advancement.²⁹ This illustrates how power relations within the colonial structure impacted their subjectivity and understanding of war. It influenced their perception of war as a struggle against both the Japanese invaders and the discriminatory practices within their own ranks.

Language barriers created difficulties in communication and integration within British units. Indian soldiers who didn't speak English fluently felt isolated and faced challenges in coordinating on the battlefield.³⁰ This affected their sense of belonging and understanding of war as they navigated communication barriers and cultural differences. Limited opportunities for Indian soldiers to hold leadership positions also undermined their sense of agency and recognition. The majority of high-ranking positions were reserved for British officers, limiting Indian soldiers' opportunities to make strategic decisions. These experiences added complexity to their understanding of war as they navigated the dual struggle against the Japanese invaders and against oppressive practices within oppressive structures of colonialism. Thus, the methods exercised by the British colonial authorities led to the marginalization of Indian soldiers, affecting their perception of war as they grappled with both external invaders and oppressive internal structures.

²⁸ Ibid. 105.

²⁹ A. J. Barker, *The March on Delhi*. Faber & Faber, 1963, shelf 954.0359K32, Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, p. 15.

³⁰ Ibid. 16.

III. CONCLUSION

The Japanese invasion of Nagaland during the Second World War provides a poignant lens through which we can examine the complexities of war and its enduring impact on individuals and communities. This conflict was not merely a military encounter; it was a microcosm of power struggles, survival instincts, and human resilience. By focusing on the experiences of British and Japanese soldiers, Indian troops, and the Naga people, we uncover a layered narrative of courage, suffering, and adaptation under extraordinary circumstances.

For the soldiers, the Battle of Kohima was a gruelling test of physical endurance, moral resolve, and psychological resilience. Japanese soldiers entered the war with the Bushido code, a deeply ingrained ideology of honour, sacrifice, and duty. However, the realities of the battlefield—malnutrition, disease, and relentless pressure—challenged these ideals, pushing many soldiers to prioritise survival over traditional values. Incidents such as the “double suicides,” where soldiers chose death over capture or disgrace, reveal the moral dilemmas they faced. These acts, though reflective of cultural values, also underscore the psychological toll of a war fought under such harsh conditions.

British soldiers, too, faced immense challenges. They contended with the unforgiving terrain, monsoons, and a relentless enemy. Psychological warfare employed by the Japanese, including sniper attacks, propaganda leaflets, and loudspeaker appeals, added to their stress. Yet, despite these adversities, the British troops, under leaders like Field Marshal Slim, demonstrated resilience and strategic ingenuity. For Indian soldiers, their experiences were even more complex. Many fought valiantly against the Japanese, yet their roles were clouded by the irony of serving a colonial regime that denied them freedom. Discrimination, limited opportunities, and cultural barriers within the British ranks only deepened their sense of alienation, forcing them to navigate conflicting loyalties and aspirations for independence.

The Naga people, however, bore the heaviest burden of this conflict. As a marginalised community already subjected to colonial subjugation, the war compounded their hardships. Violence, displacement, and forced labour became daily realities. Japanese forces, while initially perceived by some as potential liberators, soon revealed their oppressive tendencies through cultural assimilation, economic exploitation, and outright brutality. For instance, the confiscation of food supplies and the conversion of churches into schools reflected attempts to dominate not just the land but also the identity and agency of the Naga people.

Despite their vulnerabilities, the Nagas displayed remarkable resilience and adaptability. Faced with destruction and displacement, they developed strategies to protect their communities and resist domination. Defensive measures, intelligence-sharing with the British, and their eventual reassessment of alliances highlight their agency amidst adversity. Their shifting loyalties, driven by the harsh realities of war, underscore the psychological and emotional toll they endured.

The Battle of Kohima is more than a historical event; it is a testament to the profound ways war shapes identities, perceptions, and communities. The narratives of those who lived through it reveal the intersection of personal struggles and broader power dynamics, offering a richer understanding of war's impact. It teaches us that the costs of conflict extend beyond the battlefield, leaving scars on societies and individuals that linger long after the fighting ends.

Moreover, this conflict highlights the resilience of the human spirit. From the soldiers who endured unimaginable hardships to the Naga people who fought to preserve their dignity and identity, the Battle of Kohima is a story of survival and adaptation. It challenges us to look beyond conventional military histories and delve into the psychological, social, and cultural dimensions of war.

In preserving these stories, we honour the experiences of those who lived through this pivotal moment. Their sacrifices and resilience remind us of the enduring importance of understanding history through multiple perspectives. By uncovering these narratives, we not only gain insight into the complexities of war but also learn valuable lessons about the strength and adaptability of the human spirit.

The legacy of the Battle of Kohima lies not only in its strategic importance but in its human dimension. It invites us to reflect on the intersections of power, identity, and resilience, and to acknowledge the voices of those who navigated the hardships of war. As we engage with this history, we are reminded of the need to approach the past with empathy, curiosity, and a commitment to preserving the diverse experiences that shape our collective memory.

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Illustrations:

- Image 1 : RKCS : Rajkumar Chandrajitsana Singh. Japanese soldiers begging for food. Drawing. RKCS Art Gallery.
- Image 2 : Drawing by Staff Sergeant Yasumasa Nishiji. “Japanese soldiers begging for food.” In *Tales by Japanese Soldiers of the Burma Campaign 1942-1945*, edited by Kazuo Tamayama, p. 203, London : New York : Cassell, 2000.
- Image 3 : “FSD Hill on Kohima Ridge.” Photograph. Second World War (production), Second World War (content). Imperial War Museums, MH 3082. Part of Cabinet Office Collection.
- Image 4 : No. 9 Army Film and Photo Section, Army Film and Photographic Unit. “ALLIES CAPTURE KOHIMA.” Photograph. Imperial War Museums, IND 3486. WAR OFFICE SECOND WORLD WAR OFFICIAL COLLECTION.
- Image 5 : Japanese surrender leaflet dropped on the Kohima defenders, 1944, National Army Museum, London.
- Image 6 : “Part of Naga Village after the battle.” Photograph. Second World War (production), Second World War (content). Imperial War Museums, IND 3709. Part of War Office Second World War Official Collection.
- Image 7 and 8 : “Naga refugees at Ukhrul, Manipur, India.” Film. Second World War (content). Imperial War Museums, ABY 25. Produced by Air Ministry, Directorate of Public Relations (Production sponsor) and Royal Air Force Film Production Unit (Production company). Produced by J. Swain and Dennis Francis Emile Clot. 1944-07.
- Image 9 : Five Asian men, including a Japanese soldier, raise a toast together, suggesting that all Asians can live in harmony. The text on the poster reads, “This is an appropriate occasion to drive out the English from Asia.”, National Army Museum, London.
- Image 10 : “Naga road-building gang, 1944.” Creator: No. 9 Army Film and Photo Section, Army Film and Photographic Unit. Imperial War Museums. Glass plate negative, IND 3658. Part of the War Office Second World War Official Collection.

- Image 11 : An appeal to Indian soldiers, Rashtra Gaurava Samrakshana Parishath, Bengaluru 560098.

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