

Subedar Major Sher Singh Rana

A Gurkha officer recounts his experience as a prisoner of war



Figure 1. A postcard showing an unnamed Gurkha prisoner of war. Photographed in Münster, Germany, 1916 (Kashi House).

Sher Singh Rana served as a senior native officer in the 1st battalion of the 4th Gurkha Rifles during World War One. He and his men were Gurkhas, a warrior-race from Nepal, famed for

their prowess in combat and long association with the British Army.

The Gurkhas are said to take their name from the Hindu saint named Gorakhnath. He lived in Gorakhpur ('city of Gorakh'), a district near Nepal.

Driven by their war cry 'Jaya Mahakali, Ayo Gorkhali' ('Glory to Great Kali, Gorkhas approach') and armed with their weapon of choice, the Kukri dagger, Gurkhas fought with an attitude of being the first to arrive on the battlefield and the last to leave it.

When War Broke Out

Approximately 120,000 Gurkha soldiers served in the British Army during the First World War, of which approximately 20,000 were casualties.

The Gurkhas saw active service in several key battles such as Neuve Chapelle, Ypres and Gallipoli. For this they were awarded almost 2,000 gallantry awards.

On the Western Front

The Gurkhas and Indians of the Lahore Division were virtually thrown into the fighting on the Western Front in the autumn of 1914.

A large number of those who survived the initial engagements were exhausted and suffering terribly in their trenches from the terrible winter conditions. Their dismal situation was compounded by a lack of warm clothing and adequate food.

By the end of the fighting of the battle of Givenchy, more than 800 allied soldiers were taken prisoner. Among them was Subedar-Major Sher Singh Rana.

He was to remain in captivity for much of the Great War. The following information is taken from a statement made by him on 17 April 1918 about his experiences as a prisoner of war in Germany.

Captive

Captured Indian and Gurkha soldiers of the British army were subjected to German attempts to bolster their war-time propaganda effort while interned in special camps for 'colonial soldiers'.



Figure 2. Portrait of 39 year-old prisoner of war, Nain Singh Gurung from Bansour, Samjung District, Nepal. Sketch by Hermann Struck, 1916 (Kashi House).

Indian troops in particular were encouraged to rise against their colonial masters and switch their allegiance to the German cause.

Onward Journey

The Gurkhas were sent off with other Europeans to the 'Officier Kriegsgefangenen Lager' (officer POW camp) at Osnabrück.

According to Sher Singh Rana, only one attempt was made to corrupt South Asians here. One man visited in early 1916 and began by asking him, among other things, whether he got his rations regularly. On being asked, 'Do

you think about autonomy?’, Sher Singh Rana replied that he was a Gurkha of Nepal and that he refused to listen to any such talk.

Zossen

He remained in the Osnabrück camp till about April 1916, when he was then transferred to the Indian camp at the town of Zossen near Berlin.

This transfer came as a result of several requests he had made through the American inspection team led by James Gerard, the United States Ambassador in Berlin. He and his team of camp inspectors reported on conditions in prisoner of war camps in Germany and England.

In contrast to his experience at Osnabrück, Sher Singh Rana found himself facing a great deal of German propaganda at Zossen, including the distribution of anti-British newspapers among Indian soldiers.

Sher Singh Rana did his best to dissuade Indian soldiers from listening to any advances. In his opinion, the sedition propaganda had little effect on them, ‘going in at one ear and out the other’. Sher Singh Rana’s vocal pro-

British stance would eventually lead to his being punished.



Figure 3. Sergeant Ganga Ram, a Gurkha from Dharamsala, Kangra District. Photographed at the Wünsdorf camp by Otto Stiehl (Kashi House).

Transfer

Those officers and soldiers who were suspected of maintaining active loyalty to the British were deliberately isolated from the main body of prisoners and detained under harsher

conditions in various camps for British POWs across Germany.¹

When Sher Singh was noted as having a 'baneful influence' and was seen to be carrying out 'pro-English propaganda', he was transferred to other prison camps, firstly to Berxen and then to Clausthal in the Hartz mountains in August 1916. He was to remain here for eight months.

Repatriation

By 1917, tuberculosis and other respiratory diseases were rampant and the mortality rate among Indian and Gurkha prisoners of war was particularly high.

The German authorities had most of them transported to Romania, where the milder climate was felt to be less detrimental to 'oriental' physiques.

So it was that about April 1917 all the Indian prisoners, except Sher Singh Rana, two other Gurkhas² and one Sikh officer, were sent to Romania.

These four men were the only

prisoners of the Indian Army left in Germany. Owing to their refusal to accept German propositions to switch sides, they were sent to the punishment camp at Ströhen.

Detainees in poor health (including mental health issues) were sometimes transferred to neutral countries like Switzerland or the Netherlands and sometimes exchanged with German prisoners held by the British. Sher Singh Rana was exchanged to the neutral Netherlands in 1918 and was eventually sent to England.

¹ These efforts failed to produce any significant results.

² These were Jemadar Suba Singh of the 2nd Gurkhas and Jemadar Madbir Thapa, 2/8th Gurkhas.