

# The Story of the Sikhs During the Two World Wars

## Introduction

When the First and Second World Wars broke out in the 1900s, Sikh soldiers from India played an important role in helping the Allied Forces. Even though Sikhs made up only about 2 percent of India's population, they formed more than 20 percent of the British Indian Army. Their bravery, discipline, and strong faith made them some of the most respected soldiers in the world.

## Sikhs in World War I (1914 – 1918)

At the start of the First World War, more than 1.6 million Indian soldiers were recruited to fight for the British Empire. Out of these, about 100,000 were Sikhs. They fought on four continents, in Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, often in places they had never even heard of before.



In Europe, Sikh regiments fought bravely in famous battles such as Ypres, Neuve Chapelle, Loos, and the Somme. In the Battle of Neuve Chapelle in France (March 1915), Sikh regiments lost almost 80 percent of their men, yet they never backed down. One British officer wrote, *“It was the dark days of 1914 when our men had to face mortars, grenades, and high-explosive shells ... They could reply only with their valor, their rifles, and their faith — and yet they did it.”*

The 14th Sikh Regiment became famous for its courage during the Gallipoli Campaign in 1915. Many Sikh soldiers also fought in Mesopotamia (Iraq), Egypt, Palestine, and East Africa.

By the end of World War I, more than 74,000 Indian soldiers were killed and 69,000 were wounded. Among them were tens of thousands of Sikhs who gave their lives for the freedom of others while wearing the turban, the symbol of their faith.

Letters written home tell us how hard the fighting was. One Sikh soldier wrote in 1915:

*“We were keen for the fight, and where one man fell, another from behind stood in his place. ... There is no hope of any one of us returning to India.”*

Another soldier wrote in 1916:

*“We have now come to understand what this war is. We shall experience many grave difficulties here, but shall surmount them all and return victorious — even if it takes us a hundred years.”*

Across the world there are now more than 15,000 graves and 65,000 memorials marking the resting places of soldiers from British India who died in the First World War. Many of those headstones belong to Sikh soldiers whose gravestones are engraved with the sacred words “Ik Oankar Sri Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh.”

### **Sikhs in World War II (1939 – 1945)**

When the Second World War began, the British Indian Army grew even larger — to 2.5 million soldiers. Once again, Sikhs from Punjab made up one of the biggest groups of volunteers. They fought in North Africa, Italy, Greece, Burma (Myanmar), Malaysia, and Singapore.

At the Battle of Kohima (1944) in Burma, 2,500 Punjabi soldiers fought against a powerful Japanese army of 15,000 men, and they won. This victory helped end Japan’s control in Southeast Asia.

The Royal Indian Navy and Royal Indian Air Force also played key roles in transporting troops and supplies and fighting over the oceans and skies. Sikh pilots like Flight Lieutenant Mohinder Singh Pujji flew dangerous missions across Europe to defend freedom.



By the end of World War II, about 36,000 Indian soldiers had died and 64,000 were wounded. Altogether, in both wars, more than 83,000 turban-wearing Sikh soldiers were killed and over 109,000 were wounded.

British General Frank Messervy later wrote:

*“No living glory can transcend that of their supreme sacrifice. They gave their lives for the freedom of Britain and the world, enduring shell fire with no other protection but the turban, the symbol of their faith.”*

Many Sikh soldiers were awarded medals for bravery, including the Victoria Cross, the highest military honor. Heroes such as Naik Gian Singh, Lieutenant Karamjeet Singh Judge,

Havildar Parkash Singh, and Nand Singh each risked their lives to save others and defeat the enemy.

## Legacy and Remembrance

Sikh soldiers fought not for wealth or land but for justice, peace, and freedom. They fought in lands far from home — from Belgium and France to Italy, Burma, and North Africa. Many



never returned, but their courage is remembered in war memorials around the world, including in Neuve Chapelle (France), Hollebeke (Belgium), and at India Gate (New Delhi).

Even leaders such as Winston Churchill, the British Prime Minister, recognized their service, saying that the world owes much to those brave men who “fought and died for us, wearing their turbans.”

## Conclusion

The story of the Sikhs in the two World Wars is one of incredible bravery and faith. From the muddy trenches of France to the jungles of Burma, Sikh soldiers showed courage, loyalty, and compassion. Their sacrifices helped protect freedom around the world.

On Remembrance Day (November 11), when we see the poppies and stand in silence, we remember the Sikh soldiers who fought with honor. Their message to us is clear: always value peace, stand up for what is right, and never forget those who gave their lives so we could live in freedom.

Please answer the following questions using complete sentences.

1. Why did Sikh soldiers fight in the First and Second World Wars, even though the wars were not happening in their own country? **Sikh soldiers fought in the wars to help bring peace and freedom to the world. They believed in standing up for what is right, even if the fight was not in their own country.**

2. How were Sikh soldiers important during World War I, and what were some of the places they fought in? **Sikh soldiers were very brave and helped the Allied Forces in many battles. They fought in places like France, Belgium, Egypt, Iraq, and East Africa.**
3. What does the Battle of Kohima tell us about the bravery of Sikh and Punjabi soldiers during World War II? **The Battle of Kohima shows that Sikh and Punjabi soldiers were fearless and strong. Even though there were only 2,500 of them against 15,000 Japanese soldiers, they still won the battle.**
4. How many Sikh soldiers were killed or wounded in both World Wars altogether? **In both World Wars, more than 83,000 Sikh soldiers were killed and over 109,000 were wounded.**
5. What message does the story of the Sikh soldiers give us on Remembrance Day? **The story reminds us to always remember the soldiers' bravery and sacrifices. It teaches us to value peace and be thankful for the freedom we have today. It demonstrates the incredible bravery that Sikhs are blessed with by the great grace of Vaheguru.**

