

## Overview of Foreign Military Presence in China During the First World War

The literature on the role of China during the First World War has been piling since the early 21st century, characterized by Xu Guoqi's *China and the Great War* (2005) as its herald. This welcome change, however, primarily focuses on the Chinese Labour Corps (CLC) in Western Europe and neglects the other aspects of this particular history.<sup>1</sup> This rarely touched dimension can be roughly divided into three avenues of research: the Chinese participation in Allied Intervention of the Russian Civil War, the domestic response, whether social, political or cultural, to the Great War, and the (mostly foreign) military operations that took place on Chinese soil. Granted, the second prompt has been subject to some scrutiny and analysis within China itself, but the other two remain largely uncharted territories. This brief paper seeks to outline the foreign military presence in China during that turbulent period, which may provide a partial evidential foundation to the more in-depth researches that hopefully are to follow.

### I. *The British*

One of the most involved foreign powers in China, the British had been pursuing effective power projection in the Far East ever since the failed Amherst Embassy of 1816. After the Treaty of Nanking (1842), the island of Hong Kong was ceded to the British Empire, which subsequently turned it into a major military post as well as the center of its economic interests in the Far East.<sup>2</sup> By the early 1910s, Hong Kong was home to both a Army regional command and a Navy fleet. The South China Command, by 1914, had under its aegis at least five organized infantry battalions, including both British and Imperial units. They were 2nd Battalion Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry (2/DCLI), 8 Rajputs, 25 and 26 Punjabis, as well as the 40th Pathans.<sup>3</sup> Among those, the 40th was organized into eight companies, four of which (A, B, G, and H) were composed exclusively of ethnic Pathans, including two Orakzai, one Afridi and one Yusufzai units. Two Punjabi Musalman and two Dogra companies were also attached to it.<sup>4</sup> The 8th Rajputs similarly had eight companies by July 1914, which were doubled during the war to create a second battalion.<sup>5</sup> Similar reinforcement drives took place for the 25th Punjabis, with a pre-war composition of three Sikh, two Dogra, two Musalman and a Pathan companies, as well as the 26th with four Sikh, two Afridi and two Musalman companies.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A list of CLC-oriented papers and books can be easily compiled. For example, see Guoqi Xu, *Strangers on the Western Front: Chinese Workers in the Great War* (Harvard University Press, 2011), [add others](#)

<sup>2</sup> See Article III of the Treaty of Nanking, in Anthony Snyder and Sherri West (ed.), *Readings in Global History, Vol. II* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall-Hunt, 1997), 155-159. [Note: Revised 2nd Edition.](#)

<sup>3</sup> *Letter of Major Martin Everett, TD* (The South Wales Borderers and Monmouthshire Regimental Museum of the Royal Regiment of Wales), June 8, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> "40th Pathans," *Researching the Lives and Service Records of First World War Soldiers* (accessed January 3, 2021), <https://www.researchingww1.co.uk/40th-pathans>. Also see Harry Fecitt, "The 40th Pathans in Action in East Africa, January 1916 to February 1918," *North East War Memorials Project* (March 2015), 1. [Perhaps also check 40th Pathans in the Great War, ISBN 9781781519899.](#)

<sup>5</sup> The Marquess of Cambridge, "Notes on the Armies of India, Part V 1914-1918," *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, vol. 48, no. 194 (Summer 1970), 105-108; "8th Rajputs," *Researching the Lives* (accessed January 3, 2021), <https://www.researchingww1.co.uk/8th-rajputs-1st-battalion>.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*; "25th Punjabis," *Researching the Lives* (accessed January 4, 2021); "26th Punjabis," *Researching the Lives* (accessed January 4, 2021).

Other than the aforementioned infantry troops, according to the 1911 Census, Hong Kong also housed two Royal Garrison Artillery (RGA) companies, the 83rd and 87th.<sup>7</sup> Between 1911 and 1914, the 88th was also transferred to Hong Kong, adding to its defense capacity.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the Command also oversaw a few permanent supportive units, such as the Army Pay Corps, Army Education Department, Military Provost Staff Corps, and Royal Engineers, all of which were designated to serve British soldiers in both Southern and Northern China, signifying its superior strategic importance compared to the other Chinese outposts.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, Hong Kong remained a significant base for the Navy's China Station, which shouldered the responsibilities of defending not only British possessions in China and Southeast Asia, but also Australia and New Zealand.<sup>10</sup> This already spread out force was further reduced after Winston Churchill's ascension as First Lord of the Admiralty in October 1911, as three armored cruisers (*Kent*, *Monmouth*, and *Defence*) and two protected cruisers (*Astraea* and *Flora*) were withdrawn to replenish other flotillas in home waters.<sup>11</sup> As a result, by the outbreak of World War I, the China Station's standing Hong Kong fleet consisted of only one reserve pre-dreadnought battleship (*Triumph*), three sloops (*Clio*, *Cadmus*, and *Merlin*), two cruisers (*Alacrity*, formerly *Surprise*, and *RMS Empress of Asia*), three submarines (C36, C37, and C38) and an outdated destroyer flotilla (*Whiting*, *Fame*, *Otter*, *Taku*, *Virago*, plus six River Class vessels: *Ribble*, *Welland*, *Chelmer*, *Colne*, *Jed*, *Kennet*, and the largely nonoperational *Handy*). Nonetheless, it is to be noted that the River Class destroyers engaged in regular exercises at sea, and none of them was docked at Hong Kong in August 1914.<sup>12</sup> Other than these, *HMS Tamar* also served during that period as a base ship, although with little actual combat use.

As opposed to the South China Command, the British Army simultaneously maintained a North China Command in Tientsin, which in early 1914 commanded three other standing infantry battalions stationed in the city: 2nd Battalion South Wales Borderers (2/SWB), 2nd Battalion Gloucestershire Regiment (2/BGR) and 36th Sikhs.<sup>13</sup> This regional headquarters was also given jurisdiction over the H.B.M. Legation Guard in Peking, charged with protecting the British Ambassador and the Empire's other interests in the Chinese capital.<sup>14</sup> Equipped with barracks designed for a 500-strong force, it was reported that the Guard's strength seldom exceeded 100

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<sup>7</sup> "North China, Tientsin, Headquarters Staff, North China, Tientsin, 76th Punjabis (Indian...)" The National Archives, Kew (1911), Reference RG 14/34995.

<sup>8</sup> "Royal Garrison Artillery Companies in the First World War," The Long, Long Trail (accessed January 4, 2021), <https://www.longlongtrail.co.uk/army/regiments-and-corps/the-royal-artillery-in-the-first-world-war/royal-garrison-artillery-companies-in-the-first-world-war/>.

<sup>9</sup> RG 14/34995.

<sup>10</sup> Christopher M. Bell, "Sentiment vs Strategy: British Naval Policy, Imperial Defence, and the Development of Dominion Navies, 1911-14," *The International History Review* (2014), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Timothy D. Saxon, "Anglo-Japanese naval Cooperation, 1914-1918," *Naval War. College Review*, vol. 53, issue 1 (Winter 2000), 62-93. Also see Graham Watson, "From Imperial Policeman to North Sea Battle Fleet: The Evolution of British Naval Deployment 1900-1914," <https://www.naval-history.net/xGW-RNOrganisation1900-14.htm#4>, but beware that this source has certain misidentifications.

<sup>12</sup> Norman Friedman, *British Destroyers: From Earliest Days to the Second World War* (Seaforth Publishing, 2009). Also see "HMS Welland (1904)," Military History Encyclopedia on the Web (accessed January 4, 2021), [http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/weapons\\_HMS\\_Welland\\_1904.html](http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/weapons_HMS_Welland_1904.html).

<sup>13</sup> *Letter of Martin Everett, TD*.

<sup>14</sup> Again, see RG 14/34995.

men.<sup>15</sup> Like in Hong Kong, Tientsin was also home to an Army Service Corps, a Medical Corps, and an Ordnance Department, but unlike its Southern counterpart, the North China Command enjoyed a more expansive territorial scope, allowing it to maintain troops at various locations to the north of Hong Kong, including Shanghai,<sup>16</sup> where the Volunteer Corps (SVC) was operating. Formally the militia branch of the multinational Shanghai Municipal Council, the SVC was overwhelmingly made up of British nationals and led by a British army officer, which, during wartime, essentially made it an extension of the Imperial military system. This was further attested to when the SVC's British commandant, Lt. Col. R.N. Bray, returned home to join the regular armed forces in 1915, and when 97 of "A" Company's 123 British members followed suit.<sup>17</sup> By 1914, the British components of the SVC comprised of two infantry companies with approximately 200 men, a 60-strong Shanghai Light Horse, a Field Artillery Battery equipped with 3-inch howitzers, a makeshift Engineers Company, a Machine Gun Company with at least 6 Maxim guns and an unidentified number of reservists.<sup>18</sup>

On top of the land forces, North China also housed a significant part of Royal Navy's China Station, using Wei-Hai-Wei (acquired in 1898) as a major training and supply center.<sup>19</sup> It was also the base for British naval operations in Northeastern Asian waters as remote as Russia's Petropaulovsk. Before the war broke out in July 1914, Wei-Hai-Wei and its immediately adjacent island of Liu-kung-tao harbored three cruisers (*Hampshire*, *Minotaur* and *Yarmouth*), a destroyer (*Usk*, later transferred to Tientsin), and welcomed five of Hong Kong's destroyers on their regular patrol.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, *HMS Newcastle*, another light cruiser, spent extended periods in early- and mid-1914 at Shanghai, leaving for a northward patrol from Wei-Hai-Wei in July, and stationing at Nagasaki when the China Station began to prepare for war later that month.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, a small number of British gunboats (sometimes referred to as the Yangtze Squadron) patrolled the important Yangtze River, protecting its consular and concessional posts alongside the major artery of transportation. While Shanghai remained the base port in Lower Yangtze, Wuhan (Hankow) and Chungking were the regular destinations for such gunboats in Middle and Upper Yangtze respectively, Hankow being the residence of a Rear-Admiralty directly below the

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<sup>15</sup> J. L. Cranmer-Byng, "The Old British Legation at Peking, 1860-1959: Based on a lecture delivered on 20 August, 1962," *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 3 (1963), 60-87.

<sup>16</sup> This practice continued at least into the 1920s, when the North China Command even possessed units stationed in Hong Kong itself. See Anthony Clayton, *The British Empire as a Superpower 1919-39* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1986), 209.

<sup>17</sup> Shaoting Feng, Meiding Shi and Changlin Ma, 上海租界志 [*History of Shanghai Concessions*] (Shanghai: Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences Press, 2001); see Book 2, Chapter 4, Section 3.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* Also A. McKenzie Annand, "Notes on the Shanghai Volunteer Corps," *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, vol. 53, no. 214 (Summer 1975), 98-102; see p. 101.

<sup>19</sup> "Hong Kong and Wei-Hai-Wei in 1914," The National Archives (accessed January 5, 2021), <https://livelb.nationalarchives.gov.uk/first-world-war/a-global-view/asia/hong-kong-and-wei-hai-wei/>.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Captain H.L. Cochrane, *Logbook of HMS Yarmouth, 26 August 1913. To 17 August 1914*; Captain E.B. Kiddle, *Log of HMS Minotaur, 23 November 1913 to 14 November 1914*. Both referenced by, and available at [naval-history.net](http://naval-history.net).

<sup>21</sup> Don Kindell (ed.), *Long Book of HMS Newcastle, 1 December 1913 to 9 September 1919*, [http://www.naval-history.net/OWShips-WW1-06-HMS\\_Newcastle.htm](http://www.naval-history.net/OWShips-WW1-06-HMS_Newcastle.htm). Also see "The Allied China Squadron," *The Naval Review*, vol. 2 (1915), 312-321.

Far East (China) Commander-in-Chief at Hong Kong.<sup>22</sup> In 1914, at least six such gunboats were stationed along the river: *Bramble*, *Britomart*, *Thistle*, *Kinsha*, *Woodcock*, and *Woodlark* (the last two being veteran vessels of little consequence). *Bramble* spent the most of early 1914 in Lower Yangtze between Nanking and Shanghai, occasionally visiting Hong Kong and Wei-Hai-Wei.<sup>23</sup> *Britomart* followed a similar route, yet *Thistle* cruised Southern Chinese waters around Hong Kong and Canton throughout the first half of that year, conducting exercises and short-distance patrols.<sup>24</sup> Of course, the operational theatre of British river gunboats never was constrained by the Yangtze watershed, and several small gunboats also traversed the Pearl and Si (West) Rivers, including *Moorhen*, *Sandpiper*, and *Snipe*.<sup>25</sup> It was reported that *Teal*, *Robin*, *Nightingale* and *Widgeon* were also in China Station during that period, although their special locations of deployment were uncertain.<sup>26</sup>

There also were less organized British units in China in 1914, mostly taking either of the two forms. Some were permanent garrisons and outposts at certain locales, the functions of which were more auxiliary and logistical than combat-oriented. For example, the British facilities on the island of Liu-kung-tao included not only regular barracks for the seamen and 35 Royal Marines as island guards, but also an Engineer Commanders House, a Signal Station, a Pay Department office and various coaling and storage depots.<sup>27</sup> Some others were civilian vessels that furthered British military interests in times of peace, and could easily be converted to combat uses in times of hostilities, such as the steamers operated by the famous Archibald Little on the Yangtze. By mid-1910s, these British companies had ceded most of their commercial space to their upstart Chinese counterparts like the Szechwan Steam Navigation Company and Szechwan Railway Company, but its superiority over the other foreign powers in the region remained unchallenged.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the police forces in major concessions, heavily trained and provided for by the British, also augmented their influence in China while serving the imperial

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<sup>22</sup> Archibald Duncan Blue, "British ships and West China, 1875-1941: With special reference to the Upper Yangtze," The Open University (March 1978), <http://oro.open.ac.uk/63436/1/27919402.pdf>. Also see A.D. Blue, "Land and River Routes to West China (With especial reference to the Upper Yangtze)," *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 16 (1976), 162-178.

<sup>23</sup> Lt B.E. Prichard and Lt. V.R. Brandon, *Log Book of HMS Bramble, 13 March 1914 to 24 July 1914*, [http://www.naval-history.net/OWShips-WW1-19-HMS\\_Bramble.htm](http://www.naval-history.net/OWShips-WW1-19-HMS_Bramble.htm).

<sup>24</sup> Paul Money (ed.), *Log of HMS Thistle, 4 March 1914 to 4 August 1914*, [https://naval-history.net/OWShips-WW1-19-HMS\\_Thistle.htm](https://naval-history.net/OWShips-WW1-19-HMS_Thistle.htm); Helen J (ed.), *Log of HMS Britomart, 1 January 1917 to 31 March 1920*, [http://www.naval-history.net/OWShips-WW1-19-HMS\\_Britomart.htm](http://www.naval-history.net/OWShips-WW1-19-HMS_Britomart.htm).

<sup>25</sup> Robert Harvey (ed.) and Paul Money (ed.), *Log Book of HMS Moorhen, June 1918 to January 1924*, [https://naval-history.net/OWShips-WW1-11-HMS\\_Moorhen.htm](https://naval-history.net/OWShips-WW1-11-HMS_Moorhen.htm); Paul Money (ed.), *Log Book of HMS Sandpiper, April 1913 to March 1914; April 1919 to June 1920*, [https://naval-history.net/OWShips-WW1-11-HMS\\_Sandpiper.htm](https://naval-history.net/OWShips-WW1-11-HMS_Sandpiper.htm).

<sup>26</sup> For more, see Angus Konstam, *Yangtze River Gunboats 1900-49* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2011). H.M.S. Falcon also used to operate an online repository of relevant information, see <https://web.archive.org/web/20041013161039/http://hmsfalcon.com/index.htm>.

<sup>27</sup> "The Allied China Squadron," 312. Also see *Convention Between His Majesty and the President of the National Government of the Republic of China for the Rendition of Weihaiwei and Agreement regarding certain Facilities for His Majesty's Navy after Rendition [With Map and Two Plans]* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1930), <https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com.hk/&httpsredir=1&article=1034&context=moore>; especially the maps.

<sup>28</sup> Blue, "British ships and West China, 1875-1941," 127-155.

interests of local order and control. Notable police presence in 1914 could be found in Hong Kong, Shanghai, Hankow and Tientsin, with a large number of Sikh and other Indian candidates who underwent a similar training process as their brethren in the British Army.<sup>29</sup>

This pre-war military composition was swiftly changed in late July of that year, when the Far East and Pacific arena was (rightfully) deemed as less strategically pressing and many of the units and ships mentioned above were ordered to other theatres. In order to concentrate its naval resources in the region, by July 28 all British cruisers and destroyers in Northern China, along with *HMS Thistle*, had assembled at Wei-Hai-Wei and were preparing to rendezvous with the rest of China Station at Hong Kong, as *HMS Newcastle* directly sailed from Nagasaki to Shanghai

## *II. The French*

## *III. The German*

The German military presence in China at the onset of WWI focuses overwhelmingly on its Shandong Province, a peninsula on which the German concession of Kiautschou (or Kiaochoh) was located. Soon evolving into the center of German colonial ventures in Asia after its acquisition in 1897, Kiaochoh and its administrative capital of Tsingtao took on explicitly strategic importance.<sup>30</sup> Until early 1914 it was home port for the German East Asian Fleet (Ostasiatische Kreuzergeschwader), more commonly known as the East Asia (China) Squadron.<sup>31</sup>

## *IV. The American*

## *V. The Russian*

## *VI. The Japanese*

## *VII. The Italian*

## *VIII. The Austrian-Hungarian*

## *IX. The*

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<sup>29</sup> Madhavi Thampi, "Indian Soldiers, Policemen and Watchmen in China in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," *China Report*, vol. 35, no. 4 (1999), 403-437.

<sup>30</sup> Orazio Coco, "German Imperialism in China: The Leasehold of Kiaochoh Bay (1897-1914)," *The Chinese Historical Review*, vol. 26, issue 2 (2019), 156-174.

<sup>31</sup> See J. M. Winter, *The Experience of World War I* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 77.