

The sinews of empire in the world of modern warfare

By Vron Ware

Aldershot in Hampshire, UK is a garrison town that has been a military centre since the Crimean War when the first permanent army training camp was established there. Today it has other claims to fame as the epicentre of a living military history that stretches back 200 years.

The borough of Rushmoor, which includes Aldershot and Farnborough, currently includes some 90,000 residents, ten per cent of whom are Nepali. A significant proportion of these are either serving, or recently retired, Gurkha soldiers and their families. These military migrants have formed a relatively settled community in the area since the late 1990s. However, it is the newest arrivals that constitute a more controversial addition to this particular minority.

Elderly men and women habituated to life in the Himalayas can be seen strolling through the town's main streets, searching for bargains in the market or finding respite from the cold in the indoor shopping centres. They too belong to a category of military migrants whose connection to the UK can be traced back to 1815, when warriors from the Gurkhali kingdom in what is now Nepal were first hired as mercenaries by the East India Company. Once recruited to fight Britain's wars of decolonisation, they now find themselves in a very foreign country as a result of an emotive public campaign to allow ex-Gurkhas welfare and residency rights.

Aldershot has been the official destination for many of these individuals since 2009, when the significant changes were made. Despite vocal support for Gurkha veterans on the basis of the sheer numbers who died fighting for Britain in the two World Wars, the former soldiers and their wives have been targets of racism



One-stop shop for military migrants in Wiltshire. ©Vron Ware

and resentment from local groups. This reaction exposes the contradictions that emerge when migrants also serve in the armed forces, or have done so at some point in their past. Members of the public are quick to laud their readiness to sacrifice their lives for British ‘freedoms’, but are then ready to castigate them as immigrants, foreigners and scroungers when they turn up in their neighbourhoods without their uniforms.

For Queen and Commonwealth

These very modern contradictions provide an invaluable lens through which to examine transnational networks of military migration. But serving and former Gurkhas are not the only candidates who fit into this category. There are currently several thousand Commonwealth citizens serving in the UK armed forces, recruited between 1998 and 2013 when a five-year residency requirement was temporarily waived.

The fact that migrants from the Caribbean, South Asia and the African continent were deemed eligible for military service in Britain, despite stringent restrictions aimed at deterring non-EU nationals, is invariably justified by recourse to the longer history of the Commonwealth ‘contribution’ to Britain’s war efforts. The presence of non-nationals in the army is routinely explained by the UK media as an index of deep-seated ties to the ‘mother’ country, rather than as a

particular channel of economic migration or a strategic response to low recruitment numbers.

Since the recruitment of military migrants into the armed forces draws so heavily on two centuries of colonial history, any serious analysis of the term today must contend with the implications of this past in the present. This means, for example, teasing apart the unpredictable links between military service, citizenship rights and other qualifications to 'belong' to Britain. The commemoration of the centenary of World War I currently provides opportunities for British citizens of Caribbean and South Asian heritage to explore genealogies of military labour performed in support of British interests. Thus their particular patterns of migration to the UK are recast within a longer story of entanglement in which militarist values of sacrifice, courage and loyalty can be emphasised, albeit along the lines of gender, ethnicity and faith.

Family reunion

Since 2007, the word 'soldier' has become interchangeable with the word 'hero', a label that makes the reality of migrant status all the more galling for those servicemen and women who are not UK citizens. Not surprisingly this discrepancy has often been highlighted in campaigns to stop the deportation of individuals who have served in the UK forces, often for more than a decade, and who are subsequently denied residency rights on the basis of minor infractions which prevent them from passing the 'good character' test.

In 2012, for instance, Isimeli Baleiwai, a citizen of Fiji, was served a deportation order after serving for 13 years in the British Army. During this time he had married a UK citizen with whom he had two children. His application for residency had been turned down on the basis of an assault he had allegedly committed while in the army, a military conviction that was later overturned in a magistrate's court. Once he had established his innocence and been granted the legal right to remain, he returned his medals in disgust at the treatment he had received (Vuibau 2013).

However, this particular cohort of military migrants also face other forms of disadvantages that are not experienced by their British-born colleagues, such as rising visa costs for the partners and children

who accompany them. Often moving from their country of origin straight into a UK military base, families of Commonwealth soldiers inevitably experience an intensified form of isolation. This situation is often mitigated where ethnic groups are concentrated in certain areas, such as the all-Gurkha regiment in Folkestone, Kent.

Mercenary markets

It is important to draw attention to the military migrant as a wider global phenomenon since it brings into view the wholesale marketisation of private military and security work. Third country nationals (TCNs), as they are known, frequently occupy the periphery of this increasingly diverse workforce. The vast majority are men who come from countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Fiji, the Philippines, El Salvador, Chile, or Uganda, their remittances providing a significant percentage of GDP in each case. Inevitably TCNs from the global South endure the most intensely discriminatory terms and conditions. These internal dynamics provide further evidence of how ‘the politics of market fundamentalism, militarism and disposability’ drive modern forms of violence (Giroux 2014).

In her ethnographic study of Nepali men working within the security contracting industry, Amanda Chisholm suggests that the management and marketing of TCNs’ services is ‘amenable to the labour-disciplining mechanisms used in other global industries, such as textiles and domestic care’ (Chisholm 2014: 349). However, there are particular features of this rapidly expanding ‘global market for force’ that make this form of labour migration distinctive as well.

The privatisation of military work draws largely on the experience and skills provided by thousands of former soldiers eager to transfer into a more risky but lucrative job market. Within a sector already stratified by nationality, racism and geography, certain minorities are able to market themselves on the basis of aptitude, trainability and other military attributes. One example is provided by the UK-owned Group 4 Security (G4S) Gurkha Security Services, whose brochure claims that their operatives are ‘responsible for an enhanced security service for customers with higher risk requirements and can offer strategic advice when dealing with volatile situations’.

The rationale for marketing Gurkha contractors as a separate force indicates the value of promoting an ethnic exceptionalism that can clearly prove valuable for employee and employer alike. In this instance, G4S are able to emphasise the elite Gurkha 'brand' on the basis of the Nepali soldiers' historic reputation for ferocity, discipline and loyalty. For their part, the ex-Gurkhas are able to animate these claims, creating a niche identity within a crowded market.

The use of force

In broadest terms the label 'military migrant' can be applied to all those who are motivated, obliged or forced to move from their country of origin to work in a military or security-related occupation. As US legal scholar Darryl Li (2015) argues, they form a distinct category 'because of their employment on behalf of a foreign government in the exercise of a core sovereign function: namely, the use of force'.

The various paths of military-related migration outlined here entail extensive transnational networks, often rooted in colonial structures of power and sometimes involving complex entitlements to citizenship and other forms of postcolonial belonging. Family members of those who serve in conventional armed forces potentially benefit from the prestige entailed in the work, but communities across both sectors face the particular risks that come with professions of violence. And as the reception of the elderly veterans in Aldershot suggests, the symbolic rewards of military service earned by migrants in the past provide little immunity to forms of xenophobia and forgetfulness today (Ware 2014). □

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