

The Battle of Haifa, 1918: Indian Military Agency, Colonial Power and Contested Memory

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Abstract

The Battle of Haifa, fought on 23 September 1918 during the final phase of the First World War, occupies a significant position at the intersection of military history, colonialism, sociology, philosophy and contemporary international relations. The participation of the Jodhpur, Mysore and Hyderabad Lancers in the capture of Haifa represents an important episode in the history of Indian soldiers in the First World War. The Ministry of External Affairs records that the 15th Imperial Service Cavalry Brigade, comprising these three formations, launched a mounted assault through a narrow defile, broke through Ottoman defences and captured Haifa during the wider Allied campaign in Palestine and Syria.

However, the significance of Haifa extends beyond military achievement. Indian soldiers demonstrated considerable military agency while operating within a colonial structure in which India lacked political sovereignty. The battle therefore illustrates a paradox of **agency without sovereignty**: colonised subjects could exercise courage, discipline and professional competence without controlling the wider political purposes of the imperial system in which they served. The article further examines Haifa through sociological theories of collective memory and symbolic power and philosophical questions concerning freedom, responsibility, power and historical ethics. The later commemoration of the battle, including the renaming of Delhi's Teen Murti Chowk as Teen Murti-Haifa Chowk and the centenary commemorations in 2018, demonstrates how historical events can acquire new meanings in contemporary diplomacy. The article argues that Haifa should therefore be understood not simply as a military encounter, but as a historically layered phenomenon involving colonial power, individual agency, collective memory, identity and contemporary diplomatic symbolism.

Keywords: Battle of Haifa, Indian soldiers, colonialism, agency, collective memory, historical memory, symbolic power, postcolonialism, India–Israel relations

1. Introduction

The First World War was not solely a European conflict. It involved soldiers, resources and territories across the colonial world. Indian troops participated in several theatres, including the Western Front, Mesopotamia, East Africa, Egypt, Palestine and Syria. The Battle of Haifa, fought on 23 September 1918, represents one particularly important episode of this wider Indian military participation.

During the final phase of the war, the 15th Imperial Service Cavalry Brigade, comprising the Jodhpur, Mysore and Hyderabad Lancers, participated in the Allied capture of Haifa. The Ministry of External Affairs describes the attack as a notable mounted assault against Ottoman positions, following which the Allied advance continued towards Damascus.

At first glance, Haifa appears to be primarily a story of military courage. Yet a deeper examination raises questions that conventional military history cannot fully answer. Why were Indian soldiers fighting in West Asia when India itself was under British colonial rule? How should their courage be interpreted within an imperial military structure? How does the meaning of the battle change when remembered by different communities? Why has an event from 1918 acquired contemporary relevance in India–Israel relations?

These questions make Haifa a valuable case for an interdisciplinary study of **colonialism, agency, memory and power**.

2. Historical Context and Indian Participation

The Battle of Haifa occurred during the final British-led campaign against the Ottoman Empire in Palestine and Syria. Indian formations formed an important component of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force. The campaign culminated in a series of successful advances against Ottoman positions.

The 15th Imperial Service Cavalry Brigade played a prominent role in the capture of Haifa. Its constituent units—the Jodhpur, Mysore and Hyderabad Lancers—conducted a mounted assault through difficult terrain and broke through Ottoman defensive positions. The campaign subsequently contributed to the Allied advance towards Damascus.

The battle is therefore significant within Indian military history because it demonstrates the geographical reach and operational importance of Indian troops during the First World War.

Yet military participation must be situated within the political reality of 1918. India was a colony, and Indian soldiers served within the British imperial military system. Consequently, their participation cannot simply be interpreted as the foreign policy of an independent Indian state.

This distinction is fundamental:

Indian soldiers possessed military agency, but India did not possess political sovereignty.

3. Agency without Sovereignty: A Philosophical Paradox

The most important conceptual contribution of Haifa lies in the distinction between **agency and sovereignty**.

Agency refers to the capacity of individuals or groups to act, make decisions and exercise competence within a particular social structure. Sovereignty, by contrast, refers to political authority over collective decisions and objectives.

Indian soldiers at Haifa clearly exercised agency. They trained, fought, demonstrated tactical competence and accepted extraordinary risks. However, they did not determine the larger imperial objectives of the campaign.

This produces what may be termed “**agency without sovereignty**.”

This challenges two simplistic interpretations. The first would portray Indian soldiers merely as passive instruments of British imperialism. The second would treat their military achievement as evidence of independent Indian political power.

Neither interpretation is sufficient.

A more nuanced reading recognises that **military agency can exist within structures of political domination**.

This philosophical distinction also raises an ethical question: can the courage of individuals be recognised without legitimising the larger institution in which they acted?

The answer is important for historical scholarship. Recognition of individual courage does not necessarily constitute approval of the political structure within which that courage was exercised.

4. Colonialism and the Ethics of Heroism

The Battle of Haifa raises an important philosophical problem concerning heroism.

Military heroism may involve courage, discipline, loyalty to comrades and willingness to accept personal risk. These qualities can be recognised independently of broader political judgements concerning the war. Consequently, acknowledging the bravery of Indian soldiers does not require ignoring colonialism.

Similarly, recognising colonial domination should not erase the agency of individual soldiers.

The distinction can be stated as:

Respect for the individual does not require uncritical acceptance of the institution.

This is particularly important when historical actors are remembered decades after the political circumstances in which they lived have changed.

The supplied material captures this complexity by describing Haifa simultaneously as a history of Indian military contribution and as an event embedded within imperial structures.

5. Collective Memory: Maurice Halbwachs and Haifa

The meaning of Haifa did not end in 1918. It continued to evolve through processes of remembrance.

Maurice Halbwachs' theory of **collective memory** provides an important sociological framework. Halbwachs argued that memory is socially framed: communities remember the past through the categories, identities and circumstances of the present.

This is particularly relevant to Haifa because different communities may attach different meanings to the same event.

For Indian historical memory, Haifa can represent:

military courage → sacrifice → Indian contribution to world history

Within India–Israel relations, it can represent:

shared historical experience → commemoration → diplomatic connection

Within the broader history of Palestine, the events of 1918 form part of the transition from Ottoman authority to British control and the subsequent political transformation of the region.

The significance of collective memory is therefore not that historical facts become irrelevant. Rather, memory determines **which aspects of the historical past are emphasised, commemorated and transmitted**.

Thus, the sociological question is not only:

What happened at Haifa?

but also:

How and why has Haifa been remembered in particular ways?

6. Durkheim, Collective Representation and Commemoration

Émile Durkheim's concept of **collective representations** further helps explain the social significance of commemoration.

Societies create symbols through which collective identities are expressed. Memorials, anniversaries, ceremonies and public spaces can transform historical events into shared cultural symbols.

The commemoration of Haifa therefore does more than preserve information about a military event. It connects contemporary communities with historical actors.

The process can be represented as:

Historical event → collective memory → public commemoration → collective identity

This explains why military memorials remain socially significant long after the individuals involved have disappeared.

The soldier remembered in a public ceremony is no longer simply an individual historical figure. The soldier becomes part of a larger social narrative about sacrifice, identity and belonging.

7. Bourdieu and the Symbolic Power of Public Memory

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of **symbolic power** provides another useful perspective.

Historical memory becomes particularly powerful when it is institutionalised through public spaces, official ceremonies and state narratives.

The 2018 renaming of Delhi's Teen Murti Chowk as **Teen Murti–Haifa Chowk** is an important example. The renaming connected an Indian public space with the historical memory of Indian soldiers who participated in the Battle of Haifa.

A place name is therefore more than a geographical label. It can communicate which historical experiences deserve public recognition.

From a sociological perspective, the naming of a public space gives particular historical memory **symbolic visibility and institutional legitimacy**.

It transforms memory from an individual or community recollection into part of the publicly recognised historical landscape.

8. Benedict Anderson: Memory and National Identity

Benedict Anderson's concept of **imagined communities** offers another way of understanding Haifa's contemporary significance.

National communities are created partly through shared narratives, symbols and memories. The fact that Haifa occurred outside present-day India does not prevent it from becoming part of Indian historical consciousness.

The memory of Indian soldiers allows contemporary Indians to establish a symbolic relationship with people who lived under a very different political order.

The process can therefore be understood as:

Colonial soldier → historical memory → postcolonial reinterpretation → national identity

This represents an important feature of postcolonial historical recovery. Events involving colonised populations are incorporated into national narratives after independence, sometimes acquiring meanings that were unavailable to the original historical actors.

9. Contested Memory and the History of Palestine

The memory of Haifa must also be located within the wider history of Palestine.

The capture of Haifa in 1918 was part of the defeat of Ottoman forces and the subsequent expansion of British control. It should not, however, be treated as the single cause of later political developments in Palestine. Those developments involved multiple processes, including the collapse of Ottoman rule, British imperial policy, Zionist political mobilisation, Arab nationalism and the later Mandate system.

This distinction is important because historical causation should not be reduced to one battle. At the same time, the event may be remembered differently by different communities. For Indian military history, it may represent sacrifice and professional achievement. For India–Israel relations, it has become a symbol of historical connection. Within Palestinian historical consciousness, the battle belongs to a much larger transformation associated with the end of Ottoman rule and the emergence of British control. Thus, Haifa provides an example of **contested memory**. The concept does not require concluding that all interpretations are equally supported by historical evidence. Rather, it recognises that different communities can position the same event differently within their broader historical narratives.

10. Haifa and Memory Diplomacy

The contemporary importance of Haifa is particularly visible in India–Israel relations. The centenary of the Battle of Haifa was commemorated in Israel in 2018, with participation by an Indian Army delegation. The event demonstrated that the memory of Indian soldiers continues to have institutional significance in contemporary bilateral relations. The renaming of Teen Murti Chowk further embedded the memory of Haifa within India's public historical landscape. Memory thus becomes a bridge between history and contemporary international relations. However, Haifa should be understood as one symbolic component of India–Israel relations rather than as a complete explanation of the relationship, which is shaped by wider strategic, economic, political and societal factors.

11. Historical Responsibility and Ethical Memory

The philosophical significance of Haifa ultimately concerns the ethics of remembering. What does a society owe to its historical past? A responsible memory should acknowledge the courage and sacrifice of Indian soldiers while also recognising the colonial structure within which they served. It should remember the battlefield without romanticising war. It should recognise Indian agency without confusing it with political sovereignty. It should acknowledge the contemporary diplomatic significance of the memory without treating commemoration as the only legitimate interpretation of the event. This leads to an important principle: **Ethical remembrance requires both recognition and contextualisation.** Memory becomes academically and ethically stronger when it refuses to simplify the past.

12. Conclusion

The Battle of Haifa, fought on 23 September 1918, represents far more than a military engagement between Indian cavalry and Ottoman forces. It provides a valuable interdisciplinary case study through which the relationship between **colonialism, agency, memory, identity and power** can be examined. At the military level, the participation of the Jodhpur, Mysore and Hyderabad Lancers demonstrates the significant role of Indian forces in the First World War campaigns in West Asia.

At the philosophical level, Haifa illustrates the paradox of **agency without sovereignty**. Indian soldiers demonstrated courage and military competence while operating within a colonial system in which they did not determine the larger political objectives of the war.

At the sociological level, Halbwachs' concept of collective memory demonstrates how the meaning of Haifa has been reconstructed by different communities. Durkheim's concept of collective representation helps explain the importance of ceremonies and memorials, while Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power illuminates the significance of public commemorative spaces. Anderson's theory of imagined communities further demonstrates how a colonial-era event can become incorporated into the historical consciousness of a postcolonial nation.

The contemporary commemoration of Haifa demonstrates the continuing political life of historical memory. The 2018 centenary commemorations and the renaming of Teen Murti Chowk as Teen Murti–Haifa Chowk transformed the memory of the battle into a visible element of contemporary public and diplomatic discourse.

Ultimately, Haifa reminds us that history is not simply what happened in the past. It is also the continuing process through which societies **remember, interpret, contest and give meaning to what happened**.

The Battle of Haifa therefore stands at the intersection of:

Military history → Colonial power → Human agency → Collective memory → Identity → Diplomacy

Its enduring significance lies precisely in this complexity. To remember Haifa responsibly is to recognise both the courage of the Indian soldiers who fought there and the colonial structures within which their actions occurred. Such an approach moves beyond celebratory or purely critical narratives and instead produces a historically grounded understanding of how **individual agency operates within structures of power and how historical memory continues to shape the present**.

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