

Title—Martial Races: The Military, Race & Masculinity in British Imperial Culture

Author—Heather Streets-Salter

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Categories: Empire, Military, Race, Gender

Place: Britain & British Empire

Time Period: 1840-1910

Argument Synopsis:

Martial Races: The Military, Race & Masculinity in British Imperial Culture examines the nineteenth century ideology of ‘martial races’ to explore how and why Scottish Highlanders, Punjabi Sikhs, and Nepalese Gurkhas became linked in both military and popular discourse as the British Empire’s most fierce and manly soldiers. She also emphasizes that the British army was not marginal to British culture, as is often argued in the historiography, instead highlighting the effort exerted by army representatives to attempt and shape the values of Victorian culture.

Although many historians note the connection between the three groups (Highlanders, Sikhs, Gurkhas), ‘martial race’ discourse has been almost exclusively explored in the Indian context. Streets-Salter argues that British Indian military culture was integral in shaping and sustaining bonds across Europe around ideologies of **race and gender**. Importantly, she underscores that the discourse did not operate the same in every context, and this mutability was part of its influence.

Prior to the 1857 Rebellion in India, high caste Hindus were seen as the most desirable soldiers; until they led the rebellion against British rule. The groups targeted for martial race recruiting in India, the Punjabi Sikhs and the Nepalese Gurkhas, were the groups who stayed loyal to the British during the rebellion.

Streets-Salter points to the environment of the military regiment fostering cultures of masculinity based on particular needs for discipline, loyalty, and fighting efficiency. She highlights the association between the ‘martial races’ and an **aggressive masculinity**. *Martial Races* argues that the particular masculinity envisioned by martial race ideology played a role in shaping late Victorian masculine ideals; pushing back against the dominant claim that the British army was marginal to British culture. The image of the imperial soldier took on strong significance in late Victorian Britain as an icon of masculine distinction.

By the early 1880s, native Indian newspapers were highlighting the connection between Indian nationalists and Irish nationalists in the United Kingdom. She highlights that Indian nationalism, Irish nationalism, and British feminism were part of an interconnected web of events and ideologies that informed the shape of ‘martial race’ discourse. Streets-Salter argues that the three ‘martial races’ began to be imagined as counterpoints to both nationalist and feminist critics of the regime. This point underscores the use of the language of ‘martial races’ as a discursive tool, which used the power and appeal of the language for political purposes.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- ‘Martial races’ were determined by conscious strategies of rule, not racial characteristics. The ‘martial races’ were those who had demonstrated loyalty to the British
- The British Army, and officers in particular, helped shape the values of Victorian culture and especially ideals of masculinity