

Can the Subadar speak? The Malay States Guides in November–December 1914

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15 February 2012 makes the 70th anniversary of the Fall of Singapore. It is clear that (even) 70 years on, what Churchill called the ‘worst disaster and largest capitulation in British history’ continues to occupy a uniquely prominent role in the military history of Singapore.² On one hand, this is understandable enough; the fall of Singapore brought with it three years of Japanese occupation with consequent suffering and hardship for the people of Singapore, naturally becoming ‘one of the most contentious, emotive and harrowing periods of this island’s chequered history.’³ And yet, it is also true that the prominence of the fall and occupation of Singapore as dominant discourses in historical narratives of pre-independence Singapore has been influenced, if not constructed, by and through the deliberate (and political) efforts of the People’s Action Party (PAP) government of Singapore. Since coming to power in 1959, the PAP has actively propagated a so-called ‘Singapore Story’ in public history and education that marks the British surrender and the Japanese Occupation (1942–1945) as *the* point in which the movement towards self-determination and consequently, PAP-led independence began.⁴

The inadvertent result of the ruling party’s policy vis-à-vis the ‘Singapore Story’ for has been to create a simple historically-linear narrative that marginalises, if not neglects, all other elements of Singaporean history that it deems insignificant or indeed, irrelevant to its self-centring view of Singapore’s history. This, particularly insofar as the military history of Singapore is concerned, is an ironic situation. As Murfett *et al* have made abundantly clear, the military history of Singapore does not consist solely of the events of the Second World War (WWII), but spans a period that began as early as 1275 A.D.⁵ Clearly, the propagation of a ‘Singapore Story’ that neglects such a profoundly long time frame can only be at best, an incomplete history of Singapore, and at worst, the basis of a systemic ignorance of Singapore’s martial past.

This paper is thus an attempt to contribute toward the rectification of this unfortunate situation. It proposes to deepen the study of Singapore’s martial past through critical engagement with the existing narratives of a specific event in the military history of Singapore during the First World War (WWI). Yet, it is not for *this* historian to change the education policies and imperatives of Singapore; the privilege of that responsibility, as it

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² Winston Churchill, *The Second World War, Volume IV: The Hinge of Fate* (Houghton Mifflin: New York, 1986), p. 81

³ Malcolm H. Murfett, ‘Living under the Rising Sun: Singapore and the Japanese Occupation, 1942–1945’ in Malcolm H. Murfett, et al., *Between Two Oceans: A Military History of Singapore from First Settlement to Final British Withdrawal* (Oxford University Press: Singapore, 1999), p. 248

⁴ The reasons for this politicized national history of Singapore are best explained by Hong Lysa and Huang Jianli, *The Scripting Of A National History: Singapore and Its Pasts* (Hong Kong University Press: Hong Kong, 2008), pp. 1-9

⁵ Murfett, ‘Prologue’ in *Between Two Oceans*, pp. v-vi

were, falls instead on the shoulders of the elected representatives of the Singaporean people. But be that as it may, it is entirely within the historian's remit to argue for attention to be paid to past events—in this case, perhaps *more* of the past—precisely because of their historical significance. And as such, this paper contends that it is possible through the lens of a specific focus on a particular facet of pre-independence Singaporean military history—the Malay States Guides in December 1914—to assert an especial epistemological importance and significance to the study of History itself. This paper is, to that end, both an attempt to contribute to the history of Singapore, and an argument for the epistemological development and possibility of subaltern histories for Singapore and beyond.

On 28 August 1914, Major-General Raymond Reade (General Officer Commanding the Troops, Straits Settlements Command, Singapore or GOC SSC) forwarded a message from Lieutenant-Colonel C.H.B. Lees (Commandant, Malay States Guides) to the War Office (WO). The telegram informed His Majesty's Government (HMG) of the enthusiasm of the *Sepoys* of the Malay States Guides regiment, then part of the Singapore garrison, to volunteer for overseas service.⁶ The WO sent its thanks on 31 August, promising that the offer would be kept in mind for future deployment, while Lord Kitchener wrote on 11 September, thanking the regiment for its loyal offer, while regretting that circumstances meant that it was as yet, 'impossible to send them away from Singapore.'⁷ These circumstances had changed⁸ by 2 December 1914 and the WO ordered the Guides to East Africa.⁹ These orders however, met with a hostile response instead. On 5 December, Reade was informed via anonymous letter that the regiment rejected these orders, arguing that they had a contractual right to serve only in the Malay Peninsula and the Straits Settlements.¹⁰ The letter continued to say that the offer was the invention of the regiment's Subadar-Major¹¹ and made without their consent. Menacingly it referred to the Budge-Budge Riot of 27 September 1914,¹² and declaimed that since 'we are butchered in our own country, we cannot expect better treatment from other countries, (and) therefore we strongly tell you that we will not go to other countries to fight, except those mentioned in our agreement sheets.'¹³

Existing historiography has mainly accounted for these events along two narrative strands. The first posits the over-reaching ambition of Subadar-Major Fatteh Singh in volunteering the regiment for active duty without consulting the men of the Guides beforehand, which would have revealed, according to this interpretation, a distinct unwillingness to serve outside Malaya. This narrative also draws attention to the fact that the

⁶ Arthur Young to Walter Long, 21/12/1917, India Office Records (IOR), British Library, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, pp. 86-7

⁷ Arthur Young to Walter Long, 21/12/1917, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, p. 87 and Court of Enquiry Proceedings, 21/12/1914, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, p. 235

⁸ For these specific circumstances, particularly on the German commerce raider, S.M.S. Emden — Chiang Ming Shun, 'The Weakest go to the Wall: From Money to Mutiny, 1892–1918' in *Between Two Oceans*, p. 125

⁹ Arthur Young to Walter Long, 21/12/1917, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, p. 87

¹⁰ Raymond Reade to Lord Kitchener, 09/12/1914, Appendix A. 'Anonymous complaint of men of the MSG received by me, 05/12/1914', IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, pp. 314-5

¹¹ A Subadar-Major was the highest-ranking native Indian Officer in an Indian Army regiment — Philip Mason, *A Matter of Honour – An Account of the Indian Army, Its Officers and Men* (Macmillan: London, 1986), p. 173

¹² 'In May 1914, the Japanese steamer Komagata Maru arrived in Vancouver with 376 emigrants. They were refused entry, and in July the ship left for India. On arrival in Calcutta, the passengers refused to be shipped straight to the Punjab; 18 of them were killed when the police opened fire.' This was the Budge Budge Riot — David Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldiers' Letters, 1914–18* (Macmillan, London: 1999), p. 32

¹³ Raymond Reade to Lord Kitchener, 09/12/1914, Appendix A. 'Anonymous complaint of men of the MSG received by me, 05/12/1914', IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, pp. 314-5

British authorities took no punitive measures against the Guides, who were merely sent back to their cantonment in Taiping, while the Subadar-Major was discharged from the regiment. The other strand sees the refusal as a form of collective response. It situates the behaviour of the Guides in, and as a resistance to British imperialism. Either as espoused by the Ghadar Party, or as the product of the unwillingness of Muslim Sepoys to participate in a war against Turkey.¹⁴

This paper will contend that these narratives—which have become near-canon in the military history of Singapore—are desperately in need of revision. When cross-examined against the existing primary evidence, they fail to stand up to critical analysis. There are however, limitations, since some documentary records have been lost to the vagaries of time. Moreover, since no sources directly representing the views of the Indian Sepoys themselves exist, this analysis will necessarily rely mostly—though not exclusively—on the evidence collated by the British authorities.¹⁵ Even so, the evidence is sufficient to support the following arguments.

This paper will first argue that in contrast to existing historiography, the primary evidence suggests there is ‘reasonable doubt’ that Subadar-Major Fatteh Singh was guilty of overreaching ambition since it instead suggests knowledge of and acquiescence towards volunteering before the later refusal.¹⁶ Furthermore, that the Guides suffered no immediate recriminations for their *volte-face* was not a vindication of their actions. The investigatory Court of Enquiry concluded that it was chiefly monetary interests and intrigues by the Indian Officers, combined with general seditious agitation, intrigues of enemy agents, and the religious influence of Turkey and a fear of casualties that had contributed to their behaviour.¹⁷ In focusing on the lack of a response itself, this paper argues that the lack of recrimination and the Subadar-Major’s consequent disgrace, were in fact the products of an imperial expediency centred on considerations for the political stability of the Punjab.

Moreover, while a lack of sources prevents a complete understanding of the motivations behind the refusal of the deployment orders, it does not prevent *all* critical analysis. Indeed, through a consideration of historical plausibility, this paper will demonstrate that it is more likely that the Court’s Opinion was correct, and that subsequent assertions of Ghadarist or Khilafatist influence were somewhat disingenuous.¹⁸

Finally, this paper will contend that its analysis is in an epistemological sense, subaltern history. While dissimilar to the subaltern histories that characterised themselves as challenges to elite historiographies of Indian nationalism, this paper is contemporarily subaltern since it challenges narratives that have assumed dominant positions in discourse, by identifying the ‘recalcitrant differences’ inherent to the dominant narratives that have

¹⁴ The Ghadar Party (‘revolutionary party’) was ‘a diasporic revolutionary party formed by disaffected Punjabis.’ — Leon Comber, ‘The Singapore Mutiny (1915) and the Genesis of Political Intelligence in Singapore’, *Intelligence and National Security*, 24:4 (2009), p. 530

¹⁵ This includes the testimonies of Sepoys of the 5th Madras Light Infantry that were recorded by the Court of Enquiry that investigated the later Singapore Mutiny of 1915 — Tilak R. Sareen, *Secret Documents on Singapore Mutiny 1915, Vol. I & II* (Mouto Publishing House: New Delhi, 1995)

¹⁶ A case being proven ‘beyond a reasonable doubt’ is when there exists ‘an abiding conviction to a moral certainty’ — Walter A. Shumaker, George Foster Longsdorf, *The Cyclopedic Law Dictionary* (Callaghan and Company: Chicago, 1940), p. 936

¹⁷ Court of Enquiry Proceedings, 07/01/1915, ‘Opinion’, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, pp. 260-4

¹⁸ ‘Khilafatist’ refers to the Muslim acknowledgement of the authority of the Ottoman Empire’s Caliph — Comber, ‘The Singapore Mutiny (1915)’, p. 530

subordinated or silenced these contradictions.¹⁹ By speaking for the Subadar-Major—a literal subaltern—and in proving the findings of the Court itself, this paper represents positions marginalised by imperial rationalisations and ignored by later narratives. The bases of enquiry of this perspective are thus not the essentialist products Spivak warns of; and indeed, by engaging with these narratives on their own specific foci, this perspective lends the subaltern a voice, even if missing sources limit his re-creation.²⁰ As such, this paper argues the subaltern perspective on the refusal of the Malay States Guides to deploy overseas in December 1914.

The proposition that Fattah Singh was guilty of overreaching ambition has been a prominent narrative of the Malay States Guides in December 1914. Inder Singh's history of the Guides places the proverbial smoking gun in Fattah Singh's hands, stating that the volunteer offer was the product of his 'further ambitions' alone, and sent 'without bothering to consult any of the Native Officers or the rank and file.'²¹ Furthermore, in alleging that the British authorities took no action against the Guides after their refusal to deploy on overseas service, and instead court-martialled and discharged the Subadar-Major, the argument for Fattah Singh's overreaching ambition is seemingly vindicated.²² Harper and Miller's history of the Singapore Mutiny adopts Inder Singh's analysis, stating that Fattah Singh made the offer 'purely on his own initiative.'²³ Gajendra Singh has also argued that the Guides did not join the Singapore Mutiny of February 1915 'after being assured that they would not be forced into overseas service against their will.'²⁴ Inder Singh's work is thus central to this narrative strand.

Inder Singh asserts that Fattah Singh apparently desired to further his good standing with his CO, Lees, and thus offered the regiment for overseas service.²⁵ Inder Singh thus states that when Lees published the WO's reply, it met with surprise among the men of the Guides, since they were not consulted.²⁶ Even so, in November 1914, Fattah Singh allegedly approached Lees to re-express the regiment's enthusiasm, and to request a renewal of the offer—and this time, 'the War Office (WO) jumped at the chance.'²⁷ Inder Singh thus concludes that when the orders to East Africa came on 3 December, the regiment objected that, 'in the first place they had never volunteered for War Service overseas and in the second place their agreements were only for service in Malaya.'²⁸ Consequently, Lees 'realised that his Subadar-Major had let him down' which resulted in the return of the Guides to Taiping, and Fattah Singh's trial by court-martial.²⁹ The narrative continues to state that Fattah Singh was found guilty, demoted, dismissed from service 'with ignominy' and returned to India in disgrace.³⁰ This seems to have benefited the Guides greatly—or so Inder Singh asserts—as

¹⁹ Gyan Prakash, 'Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism', *The American Historical Review*, 99:5 (1994), pp. 1481-2

²⁰ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in Carry Nelson & Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Macmillan, London: 1998), pp. 24-8

²¹ Inder Singh, *History of the Malay States Guides, 1873-1919* (Cathay Printers Limited: Penang, 1965), p. 48

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 51-2

²³ R.W.E Harper, Harry Miller, *Singapore Mutiny* (Oxford University Press: Singapore, 1984), p. 19

²⁴ Gajendra Singh, 'The Anatomy of Dissent in the Military of Colonial India during the First and Second World Wars', *Edinburgh Papers in South Asian Studies*, 20 (2006), p. 28

²⁵ Singh, *History of the Malay States Guides*, p. 48

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 48-9

²⁷ Singh, *History of the Malay States Guides*, pp. 48-9

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 51

²⁹ *Idem.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 51-2

after the dismissal of Fattah Singh, ‘the rank and file no longer grumbled,’ and ‘began to talk about offering their services or volunteering to go to the Front.’³¹

The problem with this narrative is that the primary evidence substantiates none of its assertions; indeed, Inder Singh’s work draws on his own personal recollections of the Guides and he admits to the possibility of ‘inaccuracies in (his) record.’³² While, it is also true that some evidence simply no longer exists, or is virtually impossible to access at present, documents in the British and Singaporean archives still exist and they suggest a distinctly contrary narrative to Inder Singh’s.³³ They indicate that there can be ‘reasonable doubt’ that Fattah Singh was guilty of overreaching ambition, since the evidence suggests that the men acquiesced to the initial offer. Indeed, the evidence also suggests that the lack of recrimination in fact, stemmed from imperial concerns for the Punjab.

Unsurprisingly, Major-General Reade was suitably unimpressed by the anonymous letter he received from the Sepoys of the Malay States Guides on 5 December 1914 and his immediate reaction was to order Lees to report.³⁴ Reade referred to the complaint, stating:

The men have a legitimate grievance if they were not asked their wishes before it was stated they were willing to volunteer; and a technical one if, after the published acceptance of their offer, no steps were taken to ascertain their views on the matter.³⁵

However, Lees’ report poses a serious contradiction to the Singh narrative. It states that Fattah Singh had towards the end of August 1914, come to offer the regiment for active overseas service. However, Lees also stated that when he attempted to ascertain the regiment’s views himself, ‘from one and all (he) received the same reply—“we will certainly go.”’³⁶ Furthermore, Lees stated that the other British Officers had also received ‘most gratifying reports’ by the time the WO received the offer.³⁷ While Lees’ report agrees with Singh’s narrative insofar as it states that the Subadar-Major requested that another offer be sent to the WO, Lees never did send this offer, since he stated that he was convinced that ‘the men were as keen as ever on going to the front.’³⁸

This report contradicts the assertion that the Regimental Order that informed the Guides of the WO’s felicitations surprised them. Indeed, Lees stated that trouble only began around 24 November when he received an anonymous letter informing him that certain Native Officers were telling the men to refuse to go abroad—and even then, when

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 54

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 92-3

³³ It seems that a sizeable amount of other documents were lost in a fire which burnt down the Taiping Central Police Station in 1948 — Abdul Karim Bin Badoo, *The Origin and Growth of the Malay States Guides, 1874–1919* (Department of History, University of Malaya: Singapore, 1954), pp. I-II. Furthermore, Paul H. Kratoska’s, *A select list of files of the office of the High Commissioner for the Malay States held by Arkib Negara Malaysia, 1897–1942* (Perpustakaan Universiti Sains Malaysia: Penang, 1990) lists a number of files that are related to the Guides. However, further enquiries by this historian revealed that access to these archives would only be with the permission of the Malaysian Prime Minister’s Office.

³⁴ Raymond Reade to Lord Kitchener, 09/12/1914, Appendix B. ‘My order to the Commandant, MSG, to report, dated 06/12/1914’, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, pp. 316-7

³⁵ *Idem.*

³⁶ Raymond Reade to Lord Kitchener, 09/12/1914, Appendix C. ‘Report by the Commandant, MSG, dated 06/12/1914’, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, p. 318

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 319

³⁸ *Idem.*

interrogated, these Officers denied the charge.³⁹ Accordingly, there was no further incident until 5 December and only after the orders to East Africa were published.⁴⁰ It was only then that men protested that they had not acquiesced to the offer.⁴¹ Indeed, Lees made a point of his conversation with the Native Officers on 6 December:

I met all the Indian Officers and explained to them the situation, i.e. that they had volunteered for service and that now when opportunity was offered to them, they refused... I would wish here to emphasise this point, viz: that not one of them said that they or their men had not been thoroughly consulted when the offer of our services was made.⁴²

There is thus an obvious divergence between Lees' report and Inder Singh's narrative. Indeed, Fattah Singh's own statement claims that he received the consent of every single native Indian Officer, who had reported that all their men wished to volunteer.⁴³

One would expect Fattah Singh to have maintained that position, and yet it is telling that even apart from Lees' testimony to the subsequent Court of Enquiry—which was identical to his report to Reade—the other British Officers backed Fattah Singh's statement to the hilt. Captain Maclean, commanding the Guides' Battery, stated that he 'talked often to Native Officers and men' and 'never received any hint that the men would be unwilling to go', and that to the best of his knowledge 'both of (his) Indian Officers were consulted' and he had 'no doubt that the offer was fully understood by the battery.'⁴⁴ Major Borton, who commanded the detachment left in Penang, stated that his Indian Officers and Non-Commissioned Officers (NCO) 'appeared quite keen' to volunteer and that tellingly, when the Penang detachment received the Orders, there was no objection or complaint.⁴⁵ Captain Beaumont stated that there was 'the greatest interest and keenness to go,' and that the offer to volunteer 'must have been fully understood and acquiesced in because the men talked about it to (him) after the telegram was sent' and they 'wondered when the regiment was likely to go out.'⁴⁶ Captain Minniken also stated that he had no reason to believe that the offer 'was not fully understood and acquiesced in'—specifically recollecting that Subadar Asser Singh was given instructions by the Subadar-Major to ask the men if they would volunteer, to which their answer had been one of acquiescence.⁴⁷ Lieutenant Turner, Regimental Adjutant, stated that after the offer had been sent to the WO, he had asked his NCOs, 'if they wanted to go on service' and since they had all answered affirmatively, he was 'strongly of opinion that the offer was fully understood and acquiesced in by all ranks.'⁴⁸ Captain Schomberg also stated that he was 'certain that the offer was fully understood and acquiesced in.'⁴⁹ As such, these

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 319-20

⁴⁰ Court of Enquiry Proceedings, 'Appendices', IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, pp. 266-7

⁴¹ Raymond Reade to Lord Kitchener, 09/12/1914, Appendix C. 'Report by the Commandant, MSG, dated 06/12/1914', IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, p. 321

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 322-3

⁴³ Raymond Reade to Lord Kitchener, 09/12/1914, Appendix E. 'Further report by Commandant, MSG, dated 09/12/1914', IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, pp. 328-9

⁴⁴ Court of Enquiry Proceedings, 14/12/1914, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, pp. 228-9

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 246-7

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 249

⁴⁷ Court of Enquiry Proceedings, 31/12/1914, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, p. 251

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 254

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 256

testimonies certainly create a ‘reasonable doubt,’ that Fattah Singh had volunteered the regiment without any prior consultation.

This paper thus contends that given the degree of unanimity in the testimonies of the British Officers, the assertion of Fattah Singh’s relative culpability cannot be proven ‘beyond a reasonable doubt.’⁵⁰ However, the lack of testimony from the Indian Officers and men limits the extent a complete reconstruction of the Subadar-Major’s actions prior to December 1914 is possible, which precludes any definite judgement of innocence or guilt. Moreover, the lack of any native testimony is even more glaring in the light of the fact that it was a deliberate decision of the Court not to call Indian Officers to the stand.⁵¹ Indeed, it was ‘in view of the reasons adduced’ by Lees that the Court of Enquiry decided not to take the evidence of the Indian Officers.⁵² But what were those reasons?

The British Officers were unanimous in testifying that the offer to volunteer was made after consulting the men, but the parallel story that also emerges from the Court of Enquiry, is of a regiment in disarray. Indeed, Lees claimed that ‘it was easily apparent that the regiment had been pampered and had never been taught to look upon themselves as soldiers, or being anything else but a “Sultan’s toy.”’⁵³ The Indian Officers were ‘lamentable,’ and he suggested that soon after taking command, he formed the opinion that ‘practically every Indian officer and NCO would have to be got rid of.’⁵⁴

While to Lees, this deplorable state did not affect the volunteer offer, he asserted that—as has been discussed—an anonymous letter in November informed him that certain Indian Officers were urging the men to refuse to go on service should the deployment order be issued, thus affecting their ‘keenness.’⁵⁵ When asked why the ‘original keenness (of the Guides) was not so marked,’ Lees suggested that the men were affected by Turkey’s entry into the war, and the Komagata Maru’s passage through Singapore, and the subsequent news of the Budge-Budge Riot.⁵⁶ On the other hand, he believed the change of heart itself, at least among the Indian Officers, to have been about money. While none of the Indian Officers claimed to not have been consulted, Subadar Elam Din ‘said that had the decisions regarding pay to widows, wives and orphans, also wound pensions, etc. been published at the time the offer of their services was made, he did not think this state of affairs would have arisen.’⁵⁷ Lees’ Regimental Order had informed the Guides that ‘the procedure adopted by the Indian Government as regards wound pensions, etc.’ would apply to the Guides while on overseas service.⁵⁸ Lees thus suggested that perhaps the prospect of Indian Army financial terms applying to the Guides had created discomfort, and ‘gave a slight opening for more sinister influences to take root.’⁵⁹

These influences referred to a host of subversive elements. The men were in Lees’ opinion, affected by rumours of heavy casualties on the Western Front, ‘German life destroying inventions,’ and seditious influences.⁶⁰ Lees claimed that Ghadar Party members

⁵⁰ Shumaker, Longsdorf, *The Cyclopedic Law Dictionary*, p. 936

⁵¹ Arthur Young to Lewis Harcourt, 14/01/1915, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, p. 226

⁵² Court of Enquiry Proceedings, 14/12/1914, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, p. 227

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 234

⁵⁴ *Idem*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 236

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 237

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 240-1

⁵⁸ Raymond Reade to Lord Kitchener, 09/12/1914, Appendix D. ‘Notice issued by Commandant, MSG, dated 04/12/1914’, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, p. 327

⁵⁹ Court of Enquiry Proceedings, 14/12/1914, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, p. 241

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 242

en route to the Punjab passed through Singapore and met his Sepoys in the Gurdwara—or Sikh Temple—and though he ordered his men to use only the Gurdwara in the Guides’ camp itself, the Indian Officers ‘allowed anybody in.’⁶¹ Lees claimed that he had intercepted seditious literature in the post-bags, and although he sent complaints to Headquarters, Simla and to the Postal Authorities, no action had been taken.⁶² Lees suspected that the men were also affected by the German prisoners they were guarding, ‘and other enemy agents’—although he admitted to not having proof of this.⁶³ Overall though, Lees put the blame on the Indian Officers who were ‘thoroughly unsatisfactory,’ and though he acknowledged the negative effects of sedition, he contended that two companies had behaved well, tellingly because they were ‘commanded by Indian Officers of good birth who (were) able to keep their men in hand.’⁶⁴ This alleged paucity of leadership among the Native Officers was thus why he argued that if the Court were to question the Indian Officers, ‘it would tear the regiment into factions which would be so bitter that (he) could not hold (himself) responsible for anything that might occur.’⁶⁵

The Court of Enquiry agreed with Lees; its decision (which the next chapter will discuss in depth) was an affirmation of his explanation. The Court opined that it was chiefly monetary interests and intrigues by the Indian Officers, combined with general seditious agitation, intrigues of enemy agents, and the religious influence of Turkey and a fear of casualties that had contributed to their behaviour.⁶⁶ The Court also agreed not to call for native evidence, in agreement with Lees, admitting thus that ‘the absence of this evidence makes it very difficult for the Court to arrive at definite conclusions’ on many points.⁶⁷ Yet while the Court concluded that this affair was ‘chiefly caused by intrigue among the Indian Officers and older Non-Commissioned Officers,’ it also stated that it regarded it as unlikely ‘that any trustworthy evidence could be obtained which would justify disciplinary measures being taken against any individual.’⁶⁸ Indeed, the only actions undertaken were the Guides’ return to Taiping, and the discharge of Subadar-Major Fattah Singh. Yet, since the Court agreed with the British Officers’ testimony that Singh had truthfully volunteered on behalf of the regiment, this course of action was quite clearly a contradiction.

The problem was that even though Fattah Singh was in the Court’s Opinion, not guilty, he clearly did not enjoy the support of his fellow Indian Officers and men. Lees believed that so long as Fattah Singh remained with the Guides, ‘so long would there be unrest and intrigue in the regiment.’⁶⁹ Yet this contradiction was of the Court’s own doing, since by letting the Guides return to Taiping without any recrimination, the Guides’ original complaint would appear legitimate. Charles Hannigan, a British Police Officer with the Federated Malay States, recorded that when the Guides arrived in Ipoh en route to Taiping, ‘hundreds of local Sikhs who were assembled on the platform, greeted the Sepoys with cheers and applause... it seemed as if the Guides were being welcomed home after a tremendous victory.’⁷⁰ This ostensible public legitimacy has made it easy for narratives—like Inder Singh’s—to conjure up a continuous strand of causation blaming Fattah Singh. Yet these

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 243

⁶² *Idem.*

⁶³ *Idem.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 245

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 246

⁶⁶ Court of Enquiry Proceedings, 07/01/1915, ‘Opinion’, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, pp. 260-4

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 261

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 260-1

⁶⁹ C.H. B. Lees to G. Badham Thornhill, 12/07/1915, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, p. 280

⁷⁰ Harper, Miller, *Singapore Mutiny*, pp. 18-19

assertions should have been untenable in the light of the Court's Opinion—so why then did the British authorities allow this skewed perspective to emerge?

The reasoning behind this non-action was in fact due to a concern for the Punjab. To be sure, Lees saw that there were only two courses of action available: either 'to keep the corps and reorganise it and to make it the efficient fighting force that it might become, or else to let it disband itself as quickly as possible.'⁷¹ The problem was that since the Native Officers were thoroughly untrustworthy, to reorganise would require wholesale changes to the Guides' Officer Corps. This was anathema because regardless of the fact that the Guides had indeed volunteered before subsequently changing their mind, their contractual obligations did not include service outside the Straits Settlements, and thus wholesale changes of the Indian Officers would have been seen as petty recriminations.⁷² On the other hand, the WO took the view that it was 'undesirable to maintain troops who having volunteered for active service subsequently change their minds.'⁷³ The Governor and GOC in Singapore shared this view, and they advocated disbandment.⁷⁴ The problem was, as the Government of India (GOI) saw it, that to disband the regiment meant 'the return of a number of discontented and seditious elements to one of the chief recruiting centres of India,' i.e. the Punjab.⁷⁵ The GOI thus rejected the immediate disbandment of the Guides, and objected to even voluntary resignation from the regiment, because it would have allowed the return of 'a large number of discontented men' who might have been exposed to seditious teaching, and hence, they desired that the Malay States 'retain these men during the war.'⁷⁶

It is quite clear that the GOI saw a definite risk to the Punjab and the fortnightly reports on the internal political situation of the Punjab produced by the GOI's Home Department reveal some particular concerns. In October 1914, District Officers warned that while there was no major trouble, the Budge Budge Riot and the Komataga Maru incident were being used by certain 'Punjabi extremists' to 'excite public opinion.'⁷⁷ In November 1914, the report warned that Sikh emigrants were being incited by the Ghadar Party to create unrest, which short of an uprising, was manifested by acts of looting and crime so as to 'generally discredit the power of the administration to preserve law and order' and to 'spread disaffection amongst the Indian troops.'⁷⁸ There were also rumours of the heavy casualties sustained by Indian Army troops through metaphorical messages that all the 'black pepper' had been consumed.⁷⁹ By December, the reports were warning that the unrest had 'rapidly degenerated into a most disorderly campaign of crime and violence,' and though the District Officers were confident that this unrest would be soon put down, they warned against the potential for further trouble that might be created by 'fresh arrivals from the Far East.'⁸⁰ It is thus easy enough to understand how the GOI would view the disbandment of a mainly Sikh

⁷¹ C. H. B. Lees to G. Badham Thornhill, 12/07/1915, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, p. 280

⁷² Reginald G. Watson, 'Memorandum', 16/01/1915, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, p. 285

⁷³ Bertram B. Cubitt to Lewis Harcourt, 12/12/1914, 'For the Army Council', IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, p. 332

⁷⁴ Arthur Young to Lewis Harcourt, 21/01/1915, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, p. 273

⁷⁵ Edmund G. Barrow to Lord Islington, 14/12/1914, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, p. 338

⁷⁶ James H. Seabrooke to Lord Islington, 14/03/1915, 'Viceroy's Telegram', IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, pp. 222-3

⁷⁷ Arthur B. Kettlewell to Henry Wheeler, 5341-S.B., 12/10/1914, 'Fortnightly report on the internal political situation in the Punjab, in special reference to the European War', IOR NEG 3097-3100

⁷⁸ Kettlewell to Wheeler, 6661-S.B., 24/11/1914, 'Fortnightly report on the internal political situation in the Punjab, in special reference to the European War', IOR NEG 3097-3100

⁷⁹ It seems that this metaphor was a particularly popular one among Indian Army Sepoys — Omissi (ed.), *Indian Voices of the Great War*, pp. 8-9

⁸⁰ Kettlewell to Wheeler, 7509-S.B., 31/12/1914, 'Fortnightly report on the internal political situation in the Punjab, in special reference to the European War', IOR NEG 3097-3100

regiment as potentially destabilising to the Punjab, particularly if this regiment had allegedly been exposed to Ghadarist influences.

The Guides were thus left alone for the time being, but with the understanding that their disbandment would follow at war's end.⁸¹ This was not to be made public knowledge, and since the Guides were to be kept intact temporarily, Fatteh Singh's position was thus untenable.⁸² However, Fatteh Singh was not court-martialled—he resigned, and Sir Arthur Young arranged for Fatteh Singh's transfer to a post in the Supreme Court.⁸³ Fatteh Singh's service record also indicates that he went on to serve with distinction in the Royal Garhwal Rifles.⁸⁴ Inder Singh's narrative is however, correct on one count—that Fatteh Singh bore the blame. The British authorities may not have charged him as such, but the contradiction between his discharge and the non-action taken against the Guides meant that he was—*ipso facto*—the scapegoat. Perhaps this paper's demonstration that the Inder Singh-based narrative is necessarily in need of revision will change that.

While the Court ruled that the British Officers were 'in no way to blame in the matter,' its Opinion was in a sense but a summary of the various factors that could have influenced the Guides.⁸⁵ Certainly, the Court was cognisant that it could not 'arrive at definite conclusions' because of the absence of native evidence.⁸⁶ Yet, perhaps it was enough to exonerate the British Officers, since the authorities were determined to disband the Guides.⁸⁷ The Court's Opinion was that the refusal of the Guides to go to East Africa was chiefly because of monetary interests—but also with intrigues by the Indian Officers, 'general seditious agitation, intrigues of enemy agents, the religious influence of Turkey' and a 'fear of casualties' as contributory.⁸⁸ Perhaps it was precisely this lack of a definite conclusion that left the question of causation open to narratives that characterised the Guides' behaviour as collective resistance, against either British imperialism or the prospect of participating in a war against Turkey. This chapter will first discuss these arguments before demonstrating that they are simply improbable when examined against primary evidence. Furthermore, this paper contends that the evidence suggests that the Court of Enquiry was probably correct to assert that the issue of 'monetary interests' was 'enough to account for the whole incident.'⁸⁹

One side of the collective resistance strand asserts that the behaviour of the Guides' in August–December 1914 was the result of 'the influence and activities of the Ghadar Party.'⁹⁰ Sho Kuwajima points out that the letter to Reade explicitly referred to 'the tragedy of the Komagata Maru at Budge Budge' and he asserts that that controversy 'was enough to divert

⁸¹ Arthur Young to Walter Long, 21/12/1917, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, pp. 95-99 and Arthur Young to Lewis Harcourt, 27/04/1915, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, pp. 198-200

⁸² Arthur Young to Lewis Harcourt, 21/01/1915, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, p. 275

⁸³ *Idem*

⁸⁴ Medal card of Fatteh Singh, 1/39 Royal Garhwal Rifles, WO 372/7, Image Reference 6600

⁸⁵ Court of Enquiry Proceedings, 07/01/1915, 'Opinion', IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, pp. 260-4

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 261

⁸⁷ '...As your Lordship is aware, the Malay States Guides were disbanded in 1919 for political reasons'—Cecil Clementi to Lord Passfield, 26/08/1931, IOR/L/MIL/7/12251

⁸⁸ Court of Enquiry Proceedings, 07/01/1915, 'Opinion', IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, p. 260

⁸⁹ *Idem*

⁹⁰ Sho Kuwajima, *The Mutiny in Singapore: War, Anti-War and the War for India's Independence* (Rainbow Publishers Ltd: New Delhi, 2006), p. 3 — Although this paper has focused primarily on Kuwajima's work, similar arguments for Ghadarist agency have also appeared in Asad-ul Iqbal Latif, *India and the Making of Singapore* (Singapore Indian Association: Singapore, 2008) and Nadzan Haron, 'Colonial Defence and British Approach to the Problems in Malaya 1874–1918', *Modern Asian Studies*, 24:2 (1990), pp. 275-95

the loyalty of the Indian soldiers stationed in Singapore.⁹¹ Kuwajjima argues that the controversy laid a fertile ground for the planting of Ghadarist propaganda, since it was primarily through the seditious literature spread by Ghadarists that the Guides were to learn of Budge Budge in September 1914.⁹² Unsurprisingly, Kuwajjima thus makes much of Lees' description of the Guides' exposure to sedition in Singapore.⁹³ Additionally, Kuwajjima asserts that around 28 December 1914, a Kasim Ismail Mansur forwarded a letter to the Turkish Consul in Rangoon that purported to be an appeal from the Guides, claiming that they were willing to mutiny if the Turks would send a warship to Singapore.⁹⁴ It is asserted that Mansur was instrumental in the refusal of the Guides to go abroad, and was further involved in instigating the 5th Madras Light Infantry to mutiny in Singapore, in February 1915.⁹⁵ For all his pains though, Mansur was found guilty of sedition and executed on the orders of the Court of Enquiry into the mutiny of the 5th Madras.⁹⁶ Thus in Kuwajjima's view, the behaviour of the Guides in December 1914 had its roots in Ghadarist-influenced resistance to the British.

Chiang Ming Shun's military history of Singapore from 1892–1918 takes a similar stance, although making less of the Ghadar Party, and more of Turkey's entry into the war. Chiang discusses the problems of the Guides that Lees stated to the Court and lists the Court's Opinion that it was monetary interests and intrigues among the Indian Officers that had led to the refusal, with other contributory causes.⁹⁷ Like Kuwajjima though, Chiang makes much of Mansur's 'reasonable letter,' this time naming Corporal Osman Khan, from the Guides' Battery as the instigator.⁹⁸ Chiang however, makes a point when he suggests that this letter and the mutiny of the 5th Madras reflected that 'the Malay States Guides was not the only regiment in Singapore with serious problems.'⁹⁹ Indeed, in associating the Guides with the Singapore Mutiny and Mansur's sedition, Chiang is stating a similar position to the Court of Enquiry into the Singapore Mutiny of February 1915:

This man (Mansur) is known to have had a hand in the refusal of the Malay States Guides to proceed on Field Service last December which incident in itself tended to exercise a bad effect upon the 5th Light Infantry... Mansur used his influence to promote fanatical unrest and general disaffection amongst the Indian Officers and rank and file, of the 5th Light Infantry... such unrest having already been engendered by the mere fact of our being at war with Turkey.¹⁰⁰

This paper contends that Chiang's association of the Guides' refusal and the later mutiny is, in effect, an argument that the Guides refused to deploy because they shared the unwillingness of the 5th Madras to go to war with Turkey. Indeed, Abdul Karim also argues in support of the

⁹¹ Kuwajjima, *The Mutiny in Singapore*, p. 30

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 28

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 32

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 42

⁹⁵ *Idem.*

⁹⁶ Tilak R. Sareen (ed.), *Secret Documents on Singapore Mutiny 1915, Vol. I & II* (Mouton Publishing House: New Delhi, 1995), p. 39 — These two volumes are the published form of IOR/L/MIL/17/19/48 and IOR/L/MIL/7/7191

⁹⁷ Chiang, 'The Weakest go to the Wall', pp. 126-7

⁹⁸ *Idem.*

⁹⁹ *Idem.*

¹⁰⁰ Sareen (ed.), *Secret Documents on Singapore Mutiny 1915*, p. 39

Turkish factor in the Guides' withdrawal of their offer.¹⁰¹ Karim bases his argument on Governor Sir Arthur Young's speech to the Singapore Legislative Council in September 1915 in which Young stated that the local Muslims were 'stirred deeply' by the entry of Turkey into the war in November 1914, and that 'fanatics who preached extreme doctrines of religious hate' further exacerbated these rumours.¹⁰² Young also stated that it was because of these rumours that the Guides withdrew their offer, before Khan attempted to seek Turkish support.¹⁰³ Thus, it seems, proving that the Guides' actions were collectively a resistance to the war against Turkey.

This narrative essentially prioritises two of the contributory causes that the Court of Enquiry raised and yet, it is not clear that such a privileging is justifiable. While the testimonies of the British Officers suggested that there were attempts to spread sedition among the Guides, it is not clear that these influences would have actually resulted in the sort of mutiny that the Ghadar Party called for. The one instance where there was a hint of mutiny is in Captain Schomberg's testimony. He stated that on 8 December 1914, his Indian bearer came to him and repeatedly advised him 'not to sleep outside.'¹⁰⁴ Schomberg stated that as he was walking through the camp later on, he heard men saying '*maro*' ('kill'), and he was also informed by an Indian Officer in the evening that it was not advisable to sleep in the camp, but if he were to do so, to put a guard on his door.¹⁰⁵ He also testified that when the regiment had returned to Taiping, Subadar Jaj Singh informed him that some men from 'A', 'B' and 'D' Companies had spoken of killing him and the other British Officers, and thereafter releasing the German prisoners and looting Singapore.¹⁰⁶ However, Lees testified that when informed of the threats, he ordered Schomberg 'to sleep without a special guard' because to show a 'want of trust in the men might have been attended by very serious trouble,' but he warned the Indian Officer of 'D' Company that he would be shot if anything happened to Schomberg.¹⁰⁷ Lees himself did not take the threat of mutiny as a serious one—and neither did the Court, which ruled that while 'some of the wilder spirits in the regiment may have talked of this; there was no real danger of a serious attempt being made.'¹⁰⁸

Even if, as Kuwaijima suggests, we admit the presence of Ghadarist propaganda in the Guides, there is little to show for it apart from the threats against Schomberg, and the anonymous letter to Reade. The letter itself is curious because it stated that 'we will not go to other countries to fight, *except those mentioned in our agreement sheets*.'¹⁰⁹ Hypothetically—would a regiment rife with Ghadarist sentiment and ready to mutiny have made it a point to specify their contractual rights and service terms? Why would that matter if they were fighting for freedom? Indeed, if the Guides had really been Ghadarite, why is it that in July 1915, they made another offer to serve overseas—this time with 45 pages of signatures and petitions from the Indian Officers and men?¹¹⁰ Indeed Lees' accompanying report stated that they were

¹⁰¹ Abdul Karim bin Badoo, *The Origin and Growth of the Malay States Guides*, p. 48

¹⁰² *Annual Reports of the Straits Settlements 1855-1941, Vol. 7 (1915-1921)*, 24/09/1915, 'Address of His Excellency the Governor, Sir Arthur Young K.C.M.G.', The National Archives of Singapore (NAS), Microfilm 000564-1, C 164, No. 16, p. 8

¹⁰³ *Idem*.

¹⁰⁴ Court of Enquiry Proceedings, 31/12/1914, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, p. 257

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 258

¹⁰⁶ Court of Enquiry Proceedings, 31/12/1914, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, p. 258

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 259

¹⁰⁸ Court of Enquiry Proceedings, 07/01/1915, 'Opinion', IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, p. 263

¹⁰⁹ Raymond Reade to Lord Kitchener, 09/12/1914, Appendix A. 'Anonymous complaint of men of the MSG received by me, 05/12/1914', IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, pp. 314-5 — emphasis added.

¹¹⁰ The M.S.G. to C. H. B. Lees, 12/07/1915, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, p. 176

motivated to prove their loyalty, and ‘wipe out the disgrace’ of their behaviour in December 1914.¹¹¹ It thus seems implausible that the Guides were ever Ghadarist.

Insofar as Khilafatist motivation is concerned, there exists a body of native evidence from the Court of Enquiry into the Singapore Mutiny of February 1915, which did in fact ask questions about the Guides. Perhaps out of the belief that the Guides’ actions in December 1914 had had ‘a bad effect’ on the 5th Madras Light Infantry—something that Chiang Ming Shun also argued.¹¹² This, when cross-referenced with the testimony of the mutineers from the 5th Madras, could not be further from the truth:

When the Malay States Guides refused to go to the front our men all said they were a faithless lot. (Jemadar Rahmat Khan, ‘A’ Company, 5th Madras Light Infantry)¹¹³

The men of my regiment on hearing the Malay States Guides had the opportunity of going to the front though an irregular corps felt ashamed that they had not been given a similar chance. (Subadar-Major Khan Mohamed Khan, 5th Madras Light Infantry)¹¹⁴

These sentiments were apparently noticed by the British Officers of the 5th Madras as well. Lieutenant Stover testified to the Court that ‘the men gave (him) the impression that they were indignant that any Sepoy should do this,’ referring of course to the refusal of the Guides to follow through on their initial offer of overseas service.¹¹⁵ This indicates that whatever the reasons the Guides had for changing their minds—these reasons were not shared by the 5th Madras Light Infantry in December 1914, who themselves would erupt two months later in mutiny, but who in the meantime found the Guides to be ‘faithless.’ This makes it improbable that the men of the Guides had anything to do with Khilafatist sentiments—which were certainly more significant in the later mutiny of the 5th Madras.¹¹⁶

Certainly, this contention would arouse the objection that there is evidence to suggest otherwise. This would be found in the testimony of a secret agent who, on Reade’s orders, observed the men of the Guides and the 5th Madras for seditious activities, and from Young’s report to the Legislative Council. The anonymous secret agent, known as ‘R’, stated to the Court of Enquiry into the Singapore Mutiny that some men of the Guides frequented the Kampong Java mosque, and associated with a known seditious fanatic called Nur Alam Shah.¹¹⁷ The secret agent alleges that Subadar Muhamed Zaman, as a ‘*murid*’ (‘disciple’) of Nur Alam Shah, was instrumental in the refusal of the Guides to serve overseas.¹¹⁸ Thus, apparently corroborating Young’s assertion of ‘extreme doctrines of religious hate’ influencing the Guides.¹¹⁹ This evidence however, should not be overstated.

Indeed, the presumption that it was Khilafatist sentiment that motivated the Guides’ *volte-face* seems a strange one, since the Guides were two-thirds Sikh.¹²⁰ Even if one-third of

¹¹¹ C. H. B. Lees to G. Badham Thornhill, 12/07/1915, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, p. 173

¹¹² Sareen (ed.), *Secret Documents on Singapore Mutiny*, p. 39

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 367

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 287

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 496

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 616

¹¹⁸ *Idem.*

¹¹⁹ ‘Address of His Excellency the Governor, Sir Arthur Young K.C.M.G.’, NAS 000564-1, C 164, No. 16, p. 8

¹²⁰ Arthur Young to Walter Long, 21/12/1917, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, p. 99

Guides were Muslim, Lees' assessment at the time of the Singapore Mutiny suggests that they were not problematic. He believed his two Muslim companies to be 'not particularly moved over the doings of their co-religionists in Singapore', but even if only 30% would 'actively assist the Government,' the majority 'would probably keep out of any trouble altogether.'¹²¹ Furthermore, the Guides, after returning to Taiping, were actively involved in suppressing the Kelantan Rebellion of April 1915—serving with distinction and quickly quelling the spread of rebellion.¹²² This poses a problem for the idea that the Guides were Khilafatist, or Ghadarist, since in the Kelantan Uprising; they showed no disinclination to serving the British Empire, even if it meant killing their Malay Muslim 'co-religionists.' Furthermore, the secret agent's testimony also reflects that Nur Alam Shah was fanatical in encouraging the ringleaders of the 5th Madras' mutiny to increase the scale and violence of their uprising.¹²³ Yet, if Nur Alam Shah was as influential in the Guides as claimed, why did the Guides not mutiny as well, and why indeed, did the 5th Madras think the men of the Malay States Guides to be 'faithless' for refusing to honour their offer?

Furthermore, despite the fact that the Enquiry into the Singapore Mutiny asserted that Mansur was 'known to have had a hand in the refusal of the Malay States Guides' in December 1914, there is no evidence of this in the Enquiry into the Guides.¹²⁴ Certainly, this could be because the Court was not aware of Mansur's involvement yet. Even so, the improbability of a Khilafatist plot underlying the Guides' refusal suggests that Mansur and Khan cannot be a reflection of the regiment's sentiments. Young's address to the Singapore legislature reflects this—stating that Khan overstated 'corporals as sergeants and the battery as a regiment.'¹²⁵ Indeed, whatever Young said publicly, HMG while acknowledging the effect of Turkey's entry into war, did not consider the Mutiny to have been a form of *jihad*.¹²⁶ Young's private letters themselves reflect his belief that the Guides were Ghadar-influenced, but of course—as discussed earlier—since the Guides' disbandment was on hold, Young could not very well express any negative view of them publicly.¹²⁷ Nevertheless, those narratives asserting Khilafatist sentiments cannot share that excuse.

This paper contends that it is implausible that whatever propaganda the Guides were exposed to were the causes of the refusal. It is more likely instead that the instigators of the Guides' behaviour in December 1914 used these movements to further their own agendas. To be sure, Gajendra Singh's study of the expressions of dissent by Sepoys has said as much:

'There was a different understanding of Ghadrite and Khilafatist propaganda by soldiers, but only the partial co-option of these revolutionary messages in the mutinies that soldiers were willing to commit... because whilst educated Ghadrites may have sought to turn any instances of insubordination into a wider pan-Indian revolt that would lead to the spiritual and moral upliftment of all oppressed peoples,

¹²¹ *Idem*.

¹²² Karim, *The Origin and Growth of the Malay States Guides*, p. 49 and Singh, *History of the Malay States Guides*, p. 54

¹²³ Sareen (ed.), *Secret Documents on Singapore Mutiny 1915*, p. 616

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 39

¹²⁵ 'Address of His Excellency the Governor, Sir Arthur Young K.C.M.G.', NAS 000564-1, C 164, No. 16, p. 8

¹²⁶ Question to the Marquess of Crewe, 'The Regimental Riot in Singapore', Hansard House of Lords (HL) Debates, 02/03/1915, Vol. 18 Col. 604-6

¹²⁷ Arthur Young to Walter Long, 21/12/1917, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, pp. 98-99

those Sikh soldiers that were mobilised by the movement came to hold different goals.¹²⁸

Singh thus asserts that despite their rhetorical association with the Ghadar movement, the Guides did not mutiny because they were not ‘forced into overseas service against their will.’¹²⁹ This of course, relies on Inder Singh’s (now-challenged) narrative, yet it appears that assertions of Ghadar or Khilafatist agendas subsumed into localised agendas has some truth to it since Lees believed that the Indian Officers could more readily influence the men by November 1914, because of the dual-controversies of Turkey’s war entry, and the Komagata Maru.¹³⁰ As Captain Minniken testified, ‘the talk about sedition and riot was deliberately manufactured with a view to frightening the authorities,’ to escape from the earlier offer of voluntary overseas service.¹³¹

This paper contends that the Court was probably right to assess the intrigues of the Indian Officers who had monetary interests as the chief factor, above Ghadarist and Khilafatist agitations.¹³² To be sure, the British Officers blamed ‘the monied men in the regiment’ who had not wanted to volunteer in the first place.¹³³ In fact, Lees stated that when confronted on 5 December 1914, the Indian Officers had drawn his attention to financial issues. Subadar Elam Din, the most senior officer after Fatteh Singh, stated that had they known that ‘the decisions regarding pay to widows, wives and orphans, (and) also wound pensions, etc.’ would be on the Indian Army scale, he ‘did not think this state of affairs would have arisen.’¹³⁴ Certainly this led to ‘uncertainty and discomfort’ especially because the Guides—paid by the Sultans of the Federated Malay States—received significantly higher terms than Indian Army regiments, which to Lees, ‘did not amount to much however, for the Indian terms then were a crying scandal, they not having been altered since the Afghan War of 1878.’¹³⁵ Captain Beaumont corroborated this, stating that while the men were ‘anxious to sign a petition to go, the Native Officers and some of the NCOs did not wish them to do it’ owing to their monetary interests.¹³⁶ Captain Minniken also stated as much, labelling the ‘monetary interests’ of the Indian Officers as the chief cause.¹³⁷ Lees thus asserted that his Indian Officers had among other things, become usurers, and had accumulated property while they were in the Malay States, becoming disinclined to go to war, in spite of what the men of the regiment might have felt.¹³⁸ His assessment was thus that they used the controversy fomented by the Komagata Maru, and the outbreak of the Turkish war, to influence the men into changing their mind.¹³⁹ This is certainly plausible. For instance, Inder Singh recalls that the Guides were ‘a family regiment’ because his own father ‘had about fifty relations and friends’ in the Guides.¹⁴⁰ That explains how the revelation that overseas service would be paid for on the lower Indian Army salary scales might have engendered ‘discomfort’; but it also suggests that these men had a

¹²⁸ Singh, ‘The Anatomy of Dissent in the Military of Colonial India’, p. 25

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 28

¹³⁰ Court of Enquiry Proceedings, 14/12/1914, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, p. 237

¹³¹ Court of Enquiry Proceedings, 31/12/1914, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261., p. 253

¹³² Court of Enquiry Proceedings, 07/01/1915, ‘Opinion’, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, p. 260

¹³³ Court of Enquiry Proceedings, 14/12/1914, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, p. 249

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 240-1

¹³⁵ C. H. B. Lees to G. Badham Thornhill, 12/07/1915, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, p. 173

¹³⁶ Court of Enquiry Proceedings, 14/12/1914, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, p. 249

¹³⁷ Court of Enquiry Proceedings, 31/12/1914, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, p. 253

¹³⁸ Court of Enquiry Proceedings, 07/01/1915, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, p. 259

¹³⁹ *Idem.*

¹⁴⁰ Singh, *History of the Malay States Guides*, p. 116

vested interest in refusing to deploy, since unlike other units in Singapore (i.e. the 5th Madras), the Guides had had their families with them in their barracks.¹⁴¹ This centrality of money and immediate personal interests would indeed go a long way toward explaining why the 5th Madras, would consider the Guides as ‘faithless’ men, rather than celebrating their victory in a legitimate cause—which Hannigan asserted was in fact, the case among other Malaysians.¹⁴²

To be fair, short of native testimony from the Guides, it is difficult to go beyond plausibility and make definite judgements. Native evidence might also be useful in examining the suggestion that the Guides were affected by rumours of heavy casualties on the Western Front and German ‘life-destroying inventions’—especially since the native evidence from the 5th Madras does in fact reflect such fears.¹⁴³ Indeed, researching the concern that German agents had been provoking Indian Sepoys to mutiny would also benefit from such evidence.¹⁴⁴ Perhaps, the hitherto inaccessible regimental reports in the Malaysian archives might go a long way into researching this hypothesis, but they remain an impossible endeavour for now. Nevertheless, this paper has argued that in terms of historical plausibility, or ‘those alternatives which we can show on the basis of contemporary evidence,’ the Court’s assessment that it was chiefly money that had influenced events in December 1914 is still more probable than a narrative of collective resistance that simply does not stand up to critical analysis.¹⁴⁵

This paper has argued the case for the necessary revision of the existing narratives on the Malay States Guides in August–December 1914. It has done so by re-engaging with the existing primary evidence, to examine the integrity and plausibility of the current and dominant narrative strands of military history on the Guides. In so doing, this paper has demonstrated that these narratives are inherently problematic because they either place a questionable emphasis on the culpability of Subadar-Major Fatteh Singh, or because their attribution of causation to larger movements—like the Ghadar or Khilafat—is highly improbable. These problems thus make a strong case for a necessary revision of this particular chapter of the military history of Singapore. Yet, this paper also considers its arguments to be of an especial importance epistemologically because of its implications for the pursuit of subaltern histories.

To be sure, it is clear that this paper is by no means similar to the original paean to ‘history from below’ that is the first volume of *Subaltern Studies*.¹⁴⁶ It is self-evident that this paper is in the first instance, a chapter of Singaporean history and is concerned neither with the historiography of Indian nationalism, nor with the historiographies of ‘colonial elitism.’¹⁴⁷ This paper does however, consider its analysis to be contemporarily subaltern in nature, in the

¹⁴¹ Singh, *History of the Malay States Guides*, p. 116 and C. H. B. Lees, 12/07/1915, ‘Short history of the M.S.G. from 16/03/14 to date’, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, p. 186

¹⁴² Harper, Miller, *Singapore Mutiny*, pp. 18-19

¹⁴³ Court of Enquiry Proceedings, 07/01/1915, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261, p. 260 and Sareen (ed.), *Secret Documents on Singapore Mutiny*, pp. 40-1

¹⁴⁴ Question by John Rees, M.P., Hansard House of Commons (HC) Debates, 21/07/1915, Vol. 73 Col. 1512-63 and Walter Long, Cabinet Memorandum, 01/01/1919, ‘Return of Enemy Subjects to the Colonies and Protectorates’, CAB/24/72 GT/6583

¹⁴⁵ For the definition of ‘historical plausibility’, see Niall Ferguson, ‘Introduction’ in Niall Ferguson (ed.), *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (Macmillan: London, 1998), p. 86

¹⁴⁶ Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Oxford University Press: New Delhi, 2008)

¹⁴⁷ Ranajit Guha, ‘On some aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India’, in Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies I*, pp. 1-2

sense posited by Gyan Prakash and *Subaltern Studies III*, which identifies ‘subalternity as a position of critique, as a recalcitrant difference that arises not outside, but inside elite discourses to exert pressure on forces and forms that subordinate it.’¹⁴⁸ Yet this naturally raises a point of order—are the existing narratives on the Malay States Guides an elite discourse?

Guha argues that the term ‘elite’ signifies ‘dominant groups, foreign as well as indigenous,’ while a ‘subaltern’ is simply ‘the general attribute of subordination’ be it in terms of class, caste, age, gender, office or any other form—although his usage was specific to a critique of the historiography of Indian nationalism.¹⁴⁹ Said further argues that the subaltern is the ‘other’ of the dominant elite, or in other words, that studies of the subaltern are in effect, a study of relations of power.¹⁵⁰ Thus, subalternity as an applicable concept has ‘acquired currency beyond the field of South Asian studies’ to effect critical positions in relation to power.¹⁵¹

This paper is thus a subaltern history firstly because, in challenging the narratives of an alleged culpability for overreaching ambition in Fattah Singh, this paper attempts to speak for a literal subaltern persona. This defence of the Subadar-Major is in fact, an attempt to speak against dominant narratives that propound these allegations, and to show the imperial rationalisations of power that led to and allowed, the British authorities to subject the question of his culpability—and reputation—to a position of subalternity, and hitherto silence. Secondly, this paper has set itself against dominant interpretations, precisely to challenge their ‘permission(s) to narrate’ causation through Indian proto-nationalist movements as the history of the Guides, and to prove such narratives to be flawed.¹⁵² This paper thus considers its analysis a subaltern history.

However, what does this association imply? Spivak points out the inherent essentialism of *Subaltern Studies*, particularly because with ‘no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself,’ the selection of subalterns from ‘the discontinuous chain of peasant insurgencies during the colonial occupation’ to ‘investigate, identify and measure the specific’, is in her view, ‘essentialist and taxonomic.’¹⁵³ Thus the famous question—‘can the subaltern speak?’ Prakash acknowledges this problem as he asserts that ‘a sense of impossibility has always marked the writing of subaltern history.’¹⁵⁴ Indeed, the nature of subalternity as a ‘minor position’ means that it is defined by ‘a certain lack’—and as such, the project of ‘recovering the subaltern as a full-blooded subject-agent must fail.’¹⁵⁵ Both Prakash and Spivak though are not suggesting that subaltern histories are futile exercises—the point is that ‘recognition of the aporetic condition of the subaltern’s silence is necessary in order to subject the intervention of the historian critic to persistent interrogation.’¹⁵⁶ And certainly, this paper cannot object to a warning of the essentialist nature of selecting ‘subaltern subject(s)’ to interrogate.

Be that as it may, the fact is that this paper did not select Fattah Singh or the history of the Malay States Guides, to be ‘subaltern subjects’; that is both the result of the actual reality

¹⁴⁸ Gyan Prakash, ‘Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism’, p. 1481

¹⁴⁹ Ranajit Guha, ‘Preface’, in Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies I*, pp. vii-viii

¹⁵⁰ Edward Said, ‘Foreword’, in Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (eds.), *Selected Subaltern Studies* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1988), pp. v-x

¹⁵¹ Gyan Prakash, ‘The Impossibility of Subaltern History’, *Nepantla: Views from South*, 1:2 (2000), pp. 287-288

¹⁵² Edward Said, ‘Permission to Narrate’, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 13:3 (1984)

¹⁵³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, pp. 24-8

¹⁵⁴ Prakash, ‘The Impossibility of Subaltern History’, p. 287

¹⁵⁵ *Idem.*

¹⁵⁶ Gyan Prakash, ‘Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism’, p. 1488

of power relations in 1914, and those narratives that have assumed dominant positions—even if they had no evidential basis for doing so. Hence, this analysis' subalternity is in fact, the product of the dominant reality of 1914—the British Empire in Singapore—and the dominant discourses of today. Indeed, this paper's challenges have thus necessarily been on the same specific foci of these narratives, making the critical engagement in that sense—*in media res*—on the battleground of the dominant's own choosing, and purely through the weapons of primary evidence available to all sides of the argument. This paper's subaltern history is thus by no means an essentialist product.

The implication of this line of thought is that perhaps, subaltern history is not so impossible after all. By definition, the dominant will always emerge on the backs of a minor and indeed subaltern subject. The historian will thus always have a subaltern subject to engage with—and it will not be one of his own creation or selection, but of the realities of power throughout history. The limitation of course—as with this paper—is that full reconstructions of history are constrained by the availability and accessibility of evidence. Nevertheless, the existence of a subaltern-dominant relationship suggests that there is an inherent battleground already providing the intrinsic material with which to engage with the past. Thus even if the historian cannot re-create the subaltern, at least the historian's analysis can lend him a voice. By way of answering Spivak then—it is thus through this subaltern perspective on the refusal of the Malay States Guides to deploy overseas in December 1914 itself that the Subadar can finally speak.