

# INDIAN WOMEN & WAR

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# What is the Indian Women and War project?

The Indian Women and War project aims to explore the involvement, contribution, and the impact of the Second World War on Indian Women.

Thanks to the support and funding from National Lottery Heritage Fund for allowing the stories of Indian women's contribution to be shared with wider audiences. Within the UK today there are South Asian communities with connections to India (pre-Partition), these communities are largely unaware of how the war affected women and how that period may have left a legacy on the South Asian community today. The project will explore stories of Women's Auxiliary Corps India, Noor Inayat Khan and Women's Royal Indian Naval Service. A big thank you to all the women from Armed Forces who volunteered to be interviewed for this project, a way of telling past histories to the present. For this project we have worked and interviewed experts in this field to expand communities' knowledge about the role Indian women made during Second World War.

This booklet is designed to accompany the exhibition. Some of this information can be found on exhibition panels, website and learning resources. We are using the term India and Indians and we are referring to history in India Pre-Partition.

More information can be found on our website [www.believeinmecic.com](http://www.believeinmecic.com)

# Overlooked Narratives of the Second World War

When it comes to our knowledge of war, we often remember what we have been taught at school. The idea that Britain fought against the Germans, but there is no mention of the war in Burma or how women had contributed. India provided the largest volunteer force in history, with approximately 2.5 million men for the Second World War. Many still do not know that during the Second World War men were part of many different theatres of war ranging from North Africa to Far East Asia.

Amongst the men there were approximately 10,000 women from India who were also needed to contribute as Japan was threatening to invade India. Whilst 8th May is celebrated as VE Day (Victory in Europe) as Germany surrendered on 8th May 1945, VJ Day is not widely known. VJ Day (Victory over Japan) is marked on 15th August 1945, and it officially marks the surrender of Japan and the end of the Second World War.



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# Women's Auxiliary Corps India

We do not hear much about the contribution Indian women made. The purpose of the Women's Auxiliary Corps India (or WAC (I) as they were often referred to) was to undertake clerical duties as the men were joining the war. The Women's Auxiliary Corps India was modelled on the Auxiliary Territorial Service (A.T.S) of Britain.

With the King's permission the WAC (I) was set up in 1942 to support the war effort. It was the first time that women in India were able to contribute outside of non-medical roles. The first women to join were the wives and daughters of British officers sent to India.

The government, both in the UK and India spent a lot of time discussing how the WAC (I) should be set up. The men did not women having the same 'titles and ranks' as them.



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*“Out of every eight auxiliaries one is European, three Anglo-Indian, three Indian Christian and only one a non-Christian Indian”*

© Alan Harfield (2005) p243

Recruitment was open to women aged 18-50 and then later dropped to 17 years old. To join women were asked to complete an application form which was different to the application men had to complete. Jobs included clerks, signallers, drivers. This meant only women in India who could speak, read and write English were accepted. This ruled out the 'everyday' Indian women from the villages as they were not educated to this level.

Indian women who were joining had the option to wear military saris. This had never happened before.



# Women's Royal Indian Naval Service

During the Second World War, women were needed in large numbers to fill the roles of men. When the Japanese threatened to invade, India was determined that everyone help to ensure that the Japanese were not successful. With India needing to train women, the WAC (I) had branched out a new unit. In 1944 the Women's Royal Indian Naval Service was formed (also known as W.R.I.N.S) which would help the Indian Navy at the time.

Just like WAC (I), the women in the WRINS were a mixture of women from all ethnicities with the common goal of defeating the Japanese. Training was not easy and often long hours. Women volunteers often had male family members on active war duties.

There were conditions for the women who joined. They had to be aged between 17-50 years of age. They also had to have a good education, with a good comprehension of both spoken and written English.

If a woman was successful in her application, then she would be allowed to attend the Training Centres. Here, women had to undergo a series of tests and lectures. They also had to attend several medical lectures where the importance of hygiene and health was stressed to them. For some of the Indian girls this would also be the first time that they would be wearing knickers under their saris to protect their modesty.



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Different parts of India had different training centres. For those volunteering from West or South then training was at Ahmednagar, if from Eastern India then training would be based in Calcutta.

WRINS were housed in hostels across India. The hostels housed the women of different ethnicities such as Hindus, Anglo-Indians, British and Indians.

There were different roles and different training roles undertaken by the women. In Karachi, was the Naval Gunnery Training Establishment. Some of the tasks women had to undertake were stripping close range weapons and assembling them back again, cleaning the weapons, and recording shoot practices. Women were also typists, loggers, coders, cypher watchers, telephonists and office clerks.

The badges of rank of officers and WRINS are similar to those worn by the Royal Indian Navy. There was also an allowance for uniform – a total of Rs 300 was paid for uniform.



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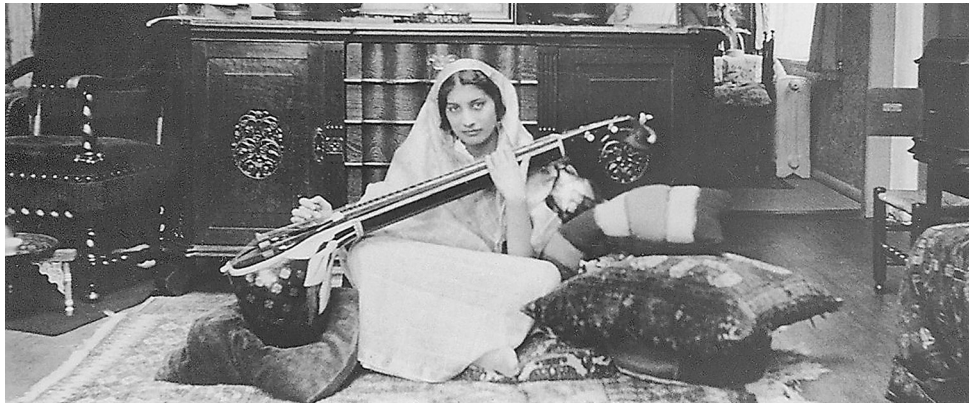
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# Noor Inayat Khan

Noor Inayat Khan worked as a spy for Britain during Second World War, was sent to France as a secret agent and then was killed in the most horrific way possible. Noor had lived a life many could not imagine, broken engagement, a secret agent, children's author – here we explore her life and contribution.

Noor Inayat Khan was born in Moscow on 1st January 1914 to an American mother, Ora Barker, and an Indian Muslim father, Inayat Khan. Noor's father was a Sufi teacher and a musician, also a descendant of Tipu Sultan who ruled the Kingdom of Mysore in south India. Noor and her siblings would often write poetry (Noor's mother was a poet) and play music. Noor had studied child psychology and becoming an established children's author, writing many children's stories both in French and English. Noor had a children's book published called 'Jataka Tales' and her stories were also broadcasted on Children's Hour of Paris. With outbreak the of the Second World War all that changed on 5th June 1940 when the family left France and settled in London.



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Noor and her family were pacifists so her decision to join the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) was surprising. Whilst Noor joined the WAAF as a radio operator, her brother, Vilayat, joined the Royal Air Force. Noor was asked to attend an interview that would change her life as she was being asked to join the Special Operations Executive (SOE). The SOE was created in 1940 as a secret military organisation with the purpose to organise and carry out espionage, sabotage and reconnaissance in occupied Europe. It was also the first military organisation in the UK to actively recruit women. Noor was selected as she could speak fluent English and French.

Training was hard physically and mentally. Some of those training Noor seemed overly critical of her- one even stating that she was not very clever, despite speaking several languages. Noor was trained as a wireless operator and the first female to be flown into France on 16-17th June 1943 she was given the codename 'Madeleine'.

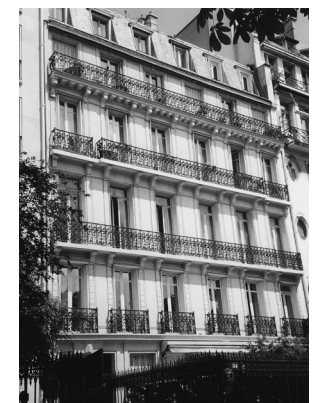
Noor became part of a resistance group and the only SOE operator in Paris. She was nearly caught a few times and when the mission became too dangerous she was asked to return back to London. Noor refused the order and went on to send several messages. In October 1943 was arrested by the Nazi's, betrayed by an acquaintance, and on 13th September 1944 was executed at Dachau. Her last words were 'Liberte'.



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## Indian coal mining women

Coal was in such high demand during the Second World War and women were being tasked to work in coal mines. The women in the coal mines were not from an educated background, they were regular women from low castes and poorer women. It is estimated around 60,000 women worked in the coal mines. The coal mining work was hard and long hours. Women were paid much lower than men and the work was demanding.

Men were working alongside their wives. The women carried the coal to the surface whilst the men were cutting the coal. This was manual labour and days were long. The working conditions were not safe, but many risked their lives in order to secure employment.

The 1943 Bengal famine which occurred in eastern India saw approximately 3 million people die. The famine was brought about by problems of food shortages, crops being damaged, and supply issues. India was in desperate need of help.



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## Forgotten Women of India

It was not just in the coal mine the 'everyday' Indian women were working. Laying roads and helping with war cargo was another huge demand on these women.

These women were not officially registered, and documents are hard to find on the actual numbers of women who contributed to war efforts. In images recovered there are no mention of names or where in India these women came from.

Generally, the women only had the option of joining the military, as the military was the biggest employer at the time. With steady work and payment this would have been the women's first time working for a large organisation.



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# Princess Indira Devi of Kapurthala

Princess Indira Devi was the eldest daughter of Maharajah Parmjit Singh and Maharani Brinda of Kapurthala, born on 26th February 1912. Indira was admired and an icon in so many ways as she was an actress, fashion icon, London socialite and a radio broadcaster. In 1935, Princess Indira left India and moved to Britain.

During the outbreak of the Second World War, Indira was an ambulance driver for the Red Cross and worked in the Postal Office. She joined the BBC during the war, where she broadcast news in Hindi to the Indian soldiers so they were aware of what was happening around them and events around the world. The broadcasts really helped the Indian soldiers, as there were approximately 2.5 million men who volunteered. Princess Indira worked for the BBC until 1968 and was dubbed 'The Radio Princess'.

Princess Indira Devi was also featured in Vogue in the 1930's. Later Indira moved to Ibiza and opened her own bar, on 1st September 1979 she passed away. Not much is known about Princess Indira once she moved to Ibiza.



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# Princess Catherine Duleep Singh

Princess Catherine Duleep Singh played an important role during the Second World War when she rescued Jewish refugees. Princess Catherine Duleep Singh is the second daughter of Maharajah Duleep Singh, the last Maharajah of the Sikh Empire and her mother was Bumba Muller. Princess Catherine's mother was of German and Absissyan descent.

During the outbreak of the Second World War, Catherine was in Germany, living with her governess, Lina Schafer. Lina had been Catherine's childhood governess, in 1908, Lina had acquired a house in Kessel, Germany which she shared with Catherine. Although there is no explicit reference to a sexual relationship between them, their relationship is often suggested as 'intimate'.

When Lina died and with the outbreak of the Second World War, Catherine's friends has suggested that it would be safer for Catherine to return back to England. In Germany, Catherine would have been in danger because of her skin colour. Catherine sold everything and returned to England, settling in Penn, Buckinghamshire.

It was here in her home that she used her own money to help rescue Jewish refugees. Many of the families arriving here in the UK, for the first time. The neighbours did not like that Catherine was housing them, they were suspicious that the new arrivals might be spies for the Germans. Princess Catherine used her house to protect many of her German friends that were fleeing the war.

On 8th November 1942 aged 71 years old, Princess Catherine had died at home with suspected heart failure. Her request was that her ashes be scattered near to Lina Schafer.



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# Princess Elizabeth

With the outbreak of the Second World War on 3rd September 1939 women were contributing to war and Britain was no exception. Did you know that Queen Elizabeth II was part of the Auxiliary Territorial service, also known as ATS?

On the 13th September 1940, Buckingham Palace was bombed, Princess Elizabeth and her sister Margaret moved to Windsor Castle whilst King George VI and Queen Elizabeth remained at the Palace in solidarity with the people of London.

In October 1940, Princess Elizabeth, aged just 14 years old, broadcasted a message of hope and courage to evacuees via the radio programme Children's Hour. She shared her experiences of being away from her parents.

As Princess Elizabeth insisted joining the ATS, in 1944, her father King George VI gave his permission. She is the first female member of the royal family to be on active duty and is the last surviving head of state to serve in the Second World War.

Princess Elizabeth trained as a mechanic in March 1945 as well as taking a driving and vehicle maintenance course at Aldershot. Special treatment did apply in some cases, each night she returned home to Windsor Castle and often used the officer's mess halls to eat her meals. Her parents visited her at Mechanical Transport training in Surrey.

By June 1945, there were an estimated 200,000 members of the ATS serving across the British Empire serving in roles such as cooks, ammunition inspectors and searchlight operators. The war in Europe ended on 8th May 1945. Princess Elizabeth joined her family on the balcony of Buckingham Palace, wearing her ATS uniform.



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