Approximately 1.3 million Indian soldiers served in World War One, and over 74,000 of them lost their lives. But history has mostly forgotten these sacrifices, which were rewarded with broken promises of Indian independence from the British government, writes Shashi Tharoor.

Exactly 100 years after the "guns of August" boomed across the European continent, the world has been extensively commemorating that seminal event. The Great War, as it was called then, was described at the time as "the war to end all wars". Ironically, the eruption of an even more destructive conflict 20 years after the end of this one meant that it is now known as the First World War. Those who fought and died in the First World War would have had little idea that there would so soon be a Second. But while the war took the flower of Europe's youth to its premature grave, snuffing out the lives of a generation of talented poets, artists, cricketers and others whose genius bled into the trenches, it also involved soldiers from faraway lands that had little to do with Europe's bitter traditional hatreds. The role and sacrifices of Australians, New Zealanders, Canadians and South Africans have been celebrated for some time in books and novels, and even rendered immortal on celluloid in award-winning films like Gallipoli. Of the 1.3 million Indian troops who served in the conflict, however, you hear very little.

As many as 74,187 Indian soldiers died during the war and a comparable number were wounded. Their stories, and their heroism, have long been omitted from popular histories of the war, or relegated to the footnotes. India contributed a number of divisions and brigades to the European, Mediterranean, Mesopotamian, North African and East African theatres of war. In Europe, Indian soldiers were among the first victims who suffered the horrors of the trenches. They were killed in droves before the war was into its second year and bore the brunt of many a German offensive. It was Indian jawans (junior soldiers) who stopped the German advance at Ypres in the autumn of 1914, soon after the war broke out, while the British were still recruiting and training their own forces. Hundreds were killed in a gallant but futile engagement at Neuve Chappelle. More than 1,000 of them died at Gallipoli, thanks to Churchill's folly. Nearly 700,000 Indian sepoys (infantry privates) fought in Mesopotamia against the Ottoman Empire, Germany's ally, many of them Indian Muslims taking up arms against their co-religionists in defence of the British Empire. The most painful experiences were those of soldiers fighting in the trenches of Europe. Letters sent by Indian soldiers in France and Belgium to their family members in their villages back home speak an evocative language of cultural dislocation and tragedy. "The shells are pouring like rain in the monsoon," declared one. "The corpses cover the country, like sheaves of harvested corn," wrote another.
These men were undoubtedly heroes - pitchforked into battle in unfamiliar lands, in harsh and cold climatic conditions they were neither used to nor prepared for, fighting an enemy of whom they had no knowledge, risking their lives every day for little more than pride. Yet they were destined to remain largely unknown once the war was over: neglected by the British, for whom they fought, and ignored by their own country, from which they came. Part of the reason is that they were not fighting for their own country. None of the soldiers was a conscript - soldiering was their profession. They served the very British Empire that was oppressing their own people back home. The British raised men and money from India, as well as large supplies of food, cash and ammunition, collected both by British taxation of Indians and from the nominally autonomous princely states. In return, the British had insincerely promised to deliver progressive self-rule to India at the end of the war. Perhaps, had they kept that pledge, the sacrifices of India's First World War soldiers might have been seen in their homeland as a contribution to India's freedom. But the British broke their word. Mahatma Gandhi, who returned to his homeland for good from South Africa in January 1915, supported the war, as he had supported the British in the Boer War. The great Nobel Prize-winning poet, Rabindranath Tagore, was somewhat more sardonic about nationalism. "We, the famished, ragged ragamuffins of the East are to win freedom for all humanity!" he wrote during the war. "We have no word for 'nation' in our language." India was wracked by high taxation to support the war and the high inflation accompanying it, while the disruption of trade caused by the conflict led to widespread economic losses - all this while the country was also reeling from a raging influenza epidemic that took many lives. But nationalists widely understood from British statements that at the end of the war India would receive the Dominion Status hitherto reserved for the "White Commonwealth".

It was not to be. When the war ended in triumph for Britain, India was denied its promised reward. Instead of self-government, the British imposed the repressive Rowlatt Act, which vested the Viceroy's government with extraordinary powers to quell "sedition" against the Empire by silencing and censoring the press, detaining political activists without trial, and arresting without a warrant any individuals suspected of treason against the Empire. Public protests against this draconian legislation were quelled ruthlessly. The worst incident was the Jallianwallah Bagh massacre of April 1919, when Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer ordered his troops to fire without warning on 15,000 unarmed and non-violent men, women and children demonstrating peacefully in an enclosed garden in Amritsar, killing as many as 1,499 and wounding up to 1,137. The fact that Dyer was hailed as a hero by the British, who raised a handsome purse to reward him for his deed, marked the final rupture between British imperialism and its Indian subjects. Sir Rabindranath Tagore returned his knighthood to the British in protest against "the helplessness of our position as British subjects in India". He did not want a "badge of honour" in "the incongruous context of humiliation". With British perfidy providing such a sour ending to the narrative of a war in which India had given its all and been spurned in return, Indian nationalists felt that the country had nothing to thank its soldiers for. They had merely gone abroad to serve their foreign masters. Losing your life or limb in a foreign war fought at the behest of your colonial rulers was an occupational hazard - it did not qualify to be hailed as a form of national service.

Or so most Indian nationalists thought, and they allowed the heroism of their compatriots to be forgotten. When the world commemorated the 50th anniversary of the First World War in 1964, there was scarcely a mention of India's soldiers anywhere, least of all in India. India's absence from the commemorations, and its failure to honour the dead, were not a major surprise. Nor was the lack of First World War memorials in the country: the
general feeling was that India, then freshly freed from the imperial yoke, was ashamed of its soldiers' participation in a colonial war and saw nothing to celebrate. The British, however, went ahead and commemorated the war by constructing the triumphal arch known as India Gate in New Delhi. India Gate, built in 1931, is a popular monument, visited by hundreds daily who have no idea that it commemorates the Indian soldiers who lost their lives fighting in World War One.

In the absence of a national war memorial, many Indians like myself see it as the only venue to pay homage to those who have lost their lives in more recent conflicts. I have stood there many times, on the anniversaries of wars with China and Pakistan, and bowed my head without a thought for the men who died in foreign fields a century ago. As a member of parliament, I twice raised the demand for a national war memorial (after a visit to the hugely impressive Australian one in Canberra) and was told there were no plans to construct one here. It was therefore personally satisfying to me, and to many of my compatriots, when the government of India announced in its budget for 2014-15 its intention finally to create a national war memorial. We are not a terribly militaristic society, but for a nation that has fought many wars and shed the blood of many heroes, and whose resolve may yet be tested in conflicts to come, it seems odd that there is no memorial to commemorate, honour and preserve the memories of those who have fought for India. The centenary is finally forcing a rethink. Remarkable photographs have been unearthed of Indian soldiers in Europe and the Middle East, and these are enjoying a new lease of life online. Looking at them, I find it impossible not to be moved - these young men, visibly so alien to their surroundings, some about to head off for battle, others nursing terrible wounds. My favourite picture is of a bearded and turbaned Indian soldier on horseback in Mesopotamia in 1918, leaning over in his saddle to give his rations to a starving local peasant girl. This spirit of compassion has been repeatedly expressed by Indian peacekeeping units in United Nations operations since, from helping Lebanese civilians in the Indian battalion's field hospital to treating the camels of Somali nomads during the UN operation there. It embodies the ethos the Indian solider brings to soldiering, whether at home or abroad.

For many Indians, curiosity has overcome the fading colonial-era resentments of British exploitation. We are beginning to see the soldiers of World War One as human beings, who took the spirit of their country to battlefields abroad. The Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research in Delhi is painstakingly working to retrieve memorabilia of that era and reconstruct the forgotten story of the 1.3 million Indian soldiers who served in the First World War. Some of the letters are unbearably poignant, especially those urging relatives back home not to commit the folly of enlisting in this futile cause. Others hint at delights officialdom frowned upon - some Indian soldiers' appreciative comments about the receptivity of Frenchwomen to their attentions, for instance. Astonishingly, almost no fiction has emerged from or about the perspective of the Indian troops. An exception is Mulk Raj Anand's Across the Black Waters, the tale of a sepoy, Lalu, dispossessed from his land, fighting in a war he cannot understand, only to return to his village to find he has lost everything and everyone
who mattered to him. The only other novel I have read about Indians in the war, John Masters' The Ravi Lancers, inevitably is a Briton's account, culminating in an Indian unit deciding to fight on in Europe "because we gave our word to serve".

But Indian literature touched the war experience in one tragic tale. When the great British poet Wilfred Owen (author of the greatest anti-war poem in the English language, Dulce et Decorum Est) was to return to the front to give his life in the futile First World War, he recited Tagore's Parting Words to his mother as his last goodbye. When he was so tragically and pointlessly killed, Owen's mother found Tagore's poem copied out in her son's hand in his diary:

When I go from hence
let this be my parting word,
that what I have seen is unsurpassable.
I have tasted of the hidden honey of this lotus
that expands on the ocean of light,
and thus am I blessed
---let this be my parting word.
In this playhouse of infinite forms
I have had my play
and here have I caught sight of him that is formless.
My whole body and my limbs
have thrilled with his touch who is beyond touch;
and if the end comes here, let it come
- let this be my parting word.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission maintains war cemeteries in India, mostly commemorating the Second World War rather than the First. The most famous epitaph of them all is inscribed at the Kohima War Cemetery in North-East India. It reads, "When you go home, tell them of us and say/ For your tomorrow, we gave our today". The Indian soldiers who died in the First World War could make no such claim. They gave their "todays" for someone else's "yesterdays". They left behind orphans, but history has orphaned them as well. As Imperialism has bitten the dust, it is recalled increasingly for its repression and racism, and its soldiers, when not reviled, are largely regarded as having served an unworthy cause.

But they were men who did their duty, as they saw it. And they were Indians. It is a matter of quiet satisfaction that their overdue rehabilitation has now begun.

About the Author: Shashi Tharoor is a former minister in India's Congress party and a former UN diplomat. He is the author of a number of books on the history, culture, politics, and foreign policy of India.