

Rob Johnson, True to their Salt. Indigenous Personnel in Western Armed Forces, London (Hurst Publishers) 2017, 532 p., ISBN 978-1-84904-425-7, GBP 25,00.

rezensiert von | compte rendu rédigé par
Raffael Scheck, Waterville, ME

Rob Johnson provides a densely researched and very well documented study of indigenous personnel in the service of western forces. His research impulse comes from present concerns about the use of local personnel in the buildup of military and police forces in Iraq and Afghanistan for the sake of security and in the context of state building and anti-terror deployments. As the introduction highlights, these recent experiences shape the book's research agenda, which focuses on morale, group cohesion, loyalty, and leadership and goes back all the way to the middle of the eighteenth century. When does it make sense to draft local personnel into armed forces? How does recruitment happen? How can one ensure that the benefits (knowledge of local languages and customs and the terrain, better resistance to local diseases, lower cost, engaging potential insurgents on one's own side) outweigh the risks (disloyalty, rebellion, double agents, losing control)?

The title is misleading, however, as the book overwhelmingly deals with service in British armed forces and occasionally the American forces. The extensive and historically very significant use of soldiers drafted in the empire of France receives only slight attention, as does the use of indigenous personnel by the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, and other powers. The study is predominantly about British experiences with local military personnel in South Asia, Africa, and North America, with some other cases tucked in. Historians of the French empire will find the book useful for comparative and analytical purposes but will likely find no original points on their subject (the author ignores much of the rich literature on the French empire).

The book starts its historical analysis with the 18th-century wars in North America and covers the drafting of local forces in South Asia in the same period. The theory of so-called »martial races«, from which Europeans preferred to draft soldiers, receives special attention, with Johnson arguing that it was not entirely a western theory but often an amalgam of western prejudices and indigenous ideas about status and hierarchy. Johnson argues that the collaboration of local men with the colonial powers serves to complicate the unilaterally condemning view of colonialism as »fundamentally unjust, often cruel and irredeemably corrupt« (p. 41). He stresses that the Indian Mutiny of 1857 represented a failure of colonial governance rather than the alleged oppressive *modus operandi* of colonialism and highlights the fact that the repression of the mutiny occurred largely with the help of local forces who had remained loyal.

The following chapters take the historical survey to the use of slaves in the wars of the Americas in the 19th century (including the American Civil War), and to the use of locals in imperial armies in Africa and South Asia, with a special focus on the Boer War and the deployment of irregulars at the imperial periphery. The chapter on the First World War pays much attention to the campaign of T. E. Lawrence on the Arabian peninsula.



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris | publiée
par l'Institut historique allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)

The Second World War receives a surprisingly thin chapter, and the following chapter about the wars of decolonization sometimes focuses a bit much on decolonization in general and less on the specific situation of local forces. The book concludes with a detailed analysis of the Afghan and Iraqi security forces 2003–14 and some thoughts about ongoing and future conflicts. Johnson criticizes the western tendency to support ailing bureaucracies in a misguided desire to replicate western systems of governance in areas where older, clan-based structures of governance at least need to be taken into account. A useful conclusion highlights the answers that the historical survey provides to the overarching questions about the successes and failures of the recruitment of local forces by the western powers.

Overall, the book provides a sharp analysis of the recruitment, deployment, and devolution of local forces in often unorthodox war contexts and security situations. It is particularly strong on aspects of British colonial history – with the best parts perhaps being the discussion of the Indian mutiny, the recruitment of Gurkhas and Sikhs on the periphery of British India, the Boer War, the Middle Eastern Campaign in World War I, and the British withdrawal from southern Arabia in the 1960s. Johnson repeatedly proposes arguments defending colonial practices with respect to drafting local forces. Even readers who do not want to agree with him on this will gain a valuable perspective on colonialism through the lens of local forces, and this perspective will at least complicate some predominant 21st-century arguments.

One important issue, however, is that the book does not seem to differentiate sufficiently between the use of local forces to establish and maintain colonial empires in the age of colonialism and the use of local forces in recent counter-insurgency operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. In the latter case, the western powers that drafted these forces wanted to create lasting security and state structures and pull out as soon as feasible, very much unlike the colonial administrators of previous centuries. To me, these two situations seem fundamentally different, although some of the dynamics that western powers have encountered with respect to the recruitment and maintenance of local forces may be similar. The author acknowledges this difference in the conclusion, highlighting 1945 as a watershed, but in the main text, the distinction is less clear.

This reviewer is in no position to assess the usefulness of this study for future efforts to draft local security personnel in counter-insurgency efforts, but the book certainly provides a rich analysis motivated by current concerns over failing or failed states and terrorism, drawing from a very rich, albeit predominantly British, historical base. In all fairness, it has to be said that the author was painfully aware of all the many case examples he had to leave out.



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris | publiée
par l'Institut historique allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)