

European Generals[@] in Maharaja Ranjit Singh's Army

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@ Portraits of most of them were on display at the Peshawar (NWFP) Museum upto the time of Partition.
- Ed. SR.

MAHARAJA RANJIT SINGH HAD NOT even an iota of doubt about the exceptional quality of Sikh soldiers and their courage and commitment in the battlefield. However his kingdom was situated between two powers, i.e. Afghans and British. While Afghans had a history of invading Punjab for centuries and the British were already firmly encamped in Delhi, where Mughals existed only in name. Moreover the British had already occupied most part of India. After gathering some information about British army, the Maharaja himself visited their military establishment in disguise. He felt that the British had efficient army equipped with sophisticated weapons. So he decided to modernize the infantry and cavalry sections of the Khalsa army and to introduce newer and advanced methods of training and sense of discipline amongst the soldiers. The Maharaja was convinced that with these steps his army's effectiveness will be considerably advanced and give the army an edge over its opponents. To achieve this objective he decided to recruit foreigners with required experience.

The Maharaja's army had total 42 non-Indians, 12 French, 4 Italians, 4 Germans, 3 Americans, 2 Spaniards, 1 Russian, 1 Scott, 3 Englishmen, 7 Anglo-Indians, and 5 others. The end of Napoleon's war in Europe in 1815, released a ready battery of European professional soldiers and the Maharaja started recruiting them from 1820 onwards. Preference was given to those who had served under Napoleon. Each of these soldiers was personally interviewed by the Maharaja himself. A few of these European soldiers who served the Khalsa army for long periods are worth mentioning:

Jean Marcois Allard:

Allard had fought in Naples, Spain, Portugal and had been with Napoleon's Imperial Guard. Starting with the lower position in the Khalsa army in 1820, he rose to be a General of the Cavalry. After serving for nearly two decades he died in 1839, the year Maharaja himself breathed his last.

Jean Baptise Ventura:

Ventura was an Italian who served in Napoleon's army. He was a few years younger than Allard in age but joined the Maharaja's service along with him in 1820 and was attached to the infantry. He fought against the Afghans in 1823, in Knagra in 1828, and Peshawar in 1832. He served as governor of Derajat and Lahore. He retired from service in 1843.

Both Allard and Ventura organised new units and introduced French drilling and training method throughout the Khalsa army. The steady increase in strength of the army's infantry and cavalry can be attributed to the inputs provided by these two army officers.

Claude Auguste Court

Court had earlier served Napoleon's army and joined the Maharaja's service in 1827. He trained Gorkha soldiers and provided inputs to development of Artillery. He increased

production of guns at the army's foundries and taught ordnance workmen how to cast shells and make fuses.

Paulo Betrolomeo Avitabile

He joined the Khalsa army in 1826. He was 6 feet tall and could speak Persian, Hindustani and Italian fluently. He was Governor of Wazirabad in 1829 and of Peshawar in 1837. He spent his accumulated wealth in improving Wazirabad city.

Some British writers have attributed the Sikh army's excellence solely due to inputs of European soldiers. This is a gross exaggeration as the European soldiers contributed only in few areas of the army in a limited way. Maharaja Ranjit Singh himself was a great military strategist and an able administrator. He won his first battle as Commander just at the age of nine. He was loved and respected by civil and military cadres. He had with him such outstanding generals like Sardar Hari Singh Nalwa and Sardar Sham Singh Attariwala.

Sardar Hari Singh Nalwa contributed in a big way to the establishment and consolidation of the Sikh kingdom under Maharaja Ranjit Singh. He was of the third generation of warriors who were associated with Sukerchakia Misl Chiefs. After succeeding in many tough expeditions, he was appointed as Governor of Kashmir. He administered the state most efficiently resulting in peace and prosperity, and improvement in revenue and trade.

In 1820 the Maharaja conquered and annexed the tribal areas adjoining Afghanistan border comprising Hazara, Swat, Waziristan and Peshawar. Most ferocious, rebellious and fanatic ethnic Pashtuns are inhabitants of that area, even Mughal rulers could not tame them. During the initial few years of annexation of these areas to the Sikh kingdom there was extreme resistance by Pashtuns and even the administrator appointed by the Maharaja was treacherously killed by the rebellious tribals. The Maharaja appointed Sardar Hari Singh Nalwa as the administrator of the area in 1822 with a force of 12,000 soldiers. He quelled many rebellions with tact and firmness. He built forts at strategic locations and laid roads to connect these forts and the area was brought under total control in 1831. He was upgraded as Governor in 1834 with headquarter at Peshawar. The fort built by Sardar Hari Singh Nalwa at Jamrud adjoining Khyber Pass, a regular passage connecting Afghanistan and Sikh kingdom became the main irritant to Afghans and they attacked the fort with a huge force. Sardar Hari Singh Nalwa dashed from Peshawar to the fort, fought valiantly and sacrificed his life in defense of the Sikh Kingdom. The invaders faced a crushing defeat and never came near the fort thereafter.

Commenting on the turbulent conditions prevailing in that area now under Pakistan Mr. G. Parthasarathy, former High Commissioner to Pakistan wrote in Times of India, dated 8th April 2009: "Historically Punjabis have subdued Pashtuns only during the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh with an expeditionary force lead by General Hari Singh Nalwa."

According to Griffin, "Sardar Hari Singh Nalwa was the bravest of Sikh Generals - The most dashing General- fertile in resources and prompt in action." Edward Union writes, "Sardar Hari Singh Nalwa carried the title 'Ney of Punjab' and whose exploits in extending the Sikh dominion were hardly eclipsed by those of Maharaja Ranjit Singh himself." Sardar Sham Singh Attariwala, one of the most respected chieftains and an outstanding commander of the Sikh kingdom had his headquarters at Attari, the place founded by his forefathers. He had taken part in several expeditions and won laurels.

A few years after the Maharaja's demise (1845-46) British waged a war against the Sikh kingdom to achieve their nefarious objective of ruling the entire Hindustan. On 10th February 1846 armies of the British and the Sikh kingdom were heading for the battle of Subrion. Ironically, traitors Tej Singh, Lal Singh and Gulab Singh, all the three holding highest positions at Lahore Darbar had conspired with British officers for their selfish gains and they acted totally against the Sikh kingdom during the battle of Subrion. It was Sardar Sham Singh Attariwali who led the Sikh kingdom army from the front, killing many and at last he fell a martyr on a heap of his slain countrymen.

Historian Sayyed Mohd.Latif writes "Hoary headed Sardar Sham Singh Attariwala dressed in a garment as white as his long snowy beard, galloped forward cheering his most ardent followers and coming death till at last fell a martyr to his country's freedom."

R. Bosworth wrote, "One old chief whose name should be recorded - Sham Singh 'among the faithless faithful only found' clothed in white and devoting himself to death, like Decius of old, called on those around him to strike for God and the Gurus and dealing death everywhere rushed manfully upon his own." While Sardar Hari Singh Nalwa was the star of the Sikh empire for his outstanding abilities as an army commander and an administrator, Sardar Sham Singh Attariwala was one of the greatest sons of India who careless of worldly benefits and personal comforts sacrificed his all to save Punjab's independence.

Many more generals of the Maharaja's army contributed to the establishment and consolidation of the Sikh empire, nevertheless Akali Phoola Singh was a class by himself. A genuine lover, builder and defender of the Sikh Raj, Akali Phoola Singh could convert defeat to victory by his firm determination and total faith in Sikh Gurus. It was due to his bold and fearless nature that Peshawar was brought under the Sikh empire in 1818. He was fatally wounded while fighting the tribals in 1823.

In conclusion it is worth quoting Captain Joseph Davy Cunningam, himself a British army officer, who in 1837 complimented the Sikh army in the following words:

"It has been usual to attribute the superiority of the Sikh army to the labours of two European officers (Generals Allard and Ventura) and their subsequent co-adjutors, the Generals Court, and Avitabile but, in truth, the Sikh owes his excellence as a soldier to his own hardihood of character, the spirit of adaptation which has distinguished every new people, and to the feeling of a common interest and destiny implanted in him by his great teachers."



References

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