

Mmhonlumo Kikon. *His Majesty's Headhunters: The Siege of Kohima that Shaped World History*. ISBN 978067009096831 (Penguin Random House, 2023), 193 pages

Reviewed by

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His Majesty's Headhunters: The Siege of Kohima that Shaped World History is an essential work that foregrounds the Indigenous Naga perspective on colonial rule and World War II. The title of the book embodies the paradox of colonial narratives where the same empire that sought to suppress and civilize the Nagas ultimately relied on their expertise, and strategic knowledge to defend its own interests. The book revises the history of the Battle of Kohima from the Naga point of view. Famously dubbed “the Stalingrad of the East” by Western scholars and referred to by recent scholars and academicians as ‘The Forgotten Battle’, it was declared one of the fiercest battles in history by the National British Museum, over both D-Day and the Battle of Waterloo. The book retells the reality of what happened in the Kohima War from the vantage point of polyphonic Naga voices. Although the Siege of Kohima is one of the battles that shaped world history, it failed to capture the public imagination and remains almost forgotten in the history books. However, it is much alive in the memories of the Naga community.

The book focuses on the point of view of the Naga storytellers, decolonising by foregrounding the “unassuming history of memories that a citizen would tell” (xvii). In an era of decolonial research and rewriting stories and justice, Kikon’s book attempts to contextualise Nagas’ involvement and experiences under the colonial regime. The book is instructional and instrumental in correcting people’s opinions on colonial injustice. Kikon wields history and

community stories from the perspective of the Naga people, representing their anticolonial desires.

The book is structured into two sections. The first, comprising eleven chapters, examines British imperial expansion in the Naga Hills from 1832 to 1947. Apart from history primarily being presented from the perspective of Western scholars and historians, the book argues that a large part of history remains undocumented, especially the Japanese invasion stories and the Naga community's involvement. The treaty of Yandabo, which led to the end of the Burmese regime (1826), is a turning point in the course of history where Assam, Arakan, Cachar, and adjoining regions came under the control of the British empire. Covering several decades of Naga history, the book is dedicated to detailing that history from British expedition and Japanese Invasion, from the 1830s to 1947. It follows the interference of the British regime in the cultural life of Nagas, the ceaseless and bloody war years between Britain's regime and the tribal warriors, the control over Naga villages, and the faceoff with the Japanese army, leading to the Nagas involvement in World War II. It addresses the establishment of British administrative headquarters, resistance by Naga warriors, missionary interventions, and the colonial demonization of headhunting. Kikon critiques the portrayal of headhunting as savagery and instead situates it within the Indigenous warfare ethics that governed Naga societies. The section also documents the British use of violence, including village burnings and forced relocations, which remain largely absent from mainstream historical accounts.

The second section, spanning nine chapters, focuses on the Battle of Kohima during World War II. The section depicts the war between the British Army and the Japanese Allied Forces that changed the course of history by pushing the Japanese to retreat, thereby halting their invasion of the greater part of India. The book highlights the crucial role of the Naga people in shaping the war's outcome. Despite their fraught history with British colonial rule,

the Nagas provided intelligence, logistical support, and topographical expertise that significantly aided the Allied forces against the Imperial Japanese Army. Kikon details how the British-Naga relationship, initially adversarial, shifted during the war, as Japanese forces' harsh treatment of local communities led to a strategic alliance between Nagas and the British.

The book argues that the British victory at Kohima, which prevented Japanese advancement into mainland India, was significantly facilitated by Naga contributions, an aspect largely ignored in British war historiography. In fact, Kikon asserts that the Naga people were indisputably why the British won the war over the Japanese forces. The author further condemns the atrocities committed by both the British Army and Japanese Troops and remarks that the brutalities of war are alive in the collective memory and shared through the medium of oral storytelling. The statistics in the book show that over seventy-one Naga villages endured the brutalities and invasion of the Japanese during the Battle of Kohima. The subsequent non-acknowledgement of the Naga soldiers and civilians by the British, with their bravery not accredited, recorded, or given the proper merit, shows them to be unsung heroes.

A particularly striking argument in the book is the absence of Naga recognition in post-war commemorations. Kikon points to the Kohima War Cemetery, where only one Naga, Saliezu Angami, is officially memorialized, despite the extensive contributions of Naga soldiers and civilians. The book makes a compelling case for re-evaluating the historical erasure of Indigenous contributions in global conflicts. Kikon also brings attention to the Japanese government's 2019 request to exhume the remains of its fallen soldiers from Kohima, underscoring how war memories continue to shape international relations while Naga narratives remain largely unacknowledged.

The book is particularly relevant in the current era of decolonial research and Indigenous rights activism. By centering Naga oral histories and community memories, Kikon

challenges the traditional top-down approach to historical writing. His meticulous research and extensive use of Indigenous sources mark an important methodological shift, pushing against the Eurocentric framework that has dominated World War II historiography.

However, while the book is a significant contribution, it would benefit from a deeper engagement with the broader implications of Naga participation in WWII within the context of Indian nationalism and the postcolonial state. Given that the Battle of Kohima took place in what is now Nagaland, the book could further explore how this history intersects with contemporary political discourses on Naga identity and autonomy.

Overall, *His Majesty's Headhunters* is an essential work that challenges historical omissions and restores agency to a community whose contributions have been largely unrecognized. The book is not just a historical revision, rather it is an act of reclamation, a necessary intervention in the ongoing struggle to decolonize historical narratives and recognize Indigenous agency. By foregrounding the role of the Indigenous Nagas in shaping world history, the book challenges the erasures of colonial historiography and calls for re-examination of conflict through the lens of those who lived and endured them. It is an important read for scholars of South Asian history, colonial studies, and Indigenous rights, and it calls for a rethinking of how global history is written and remembered.