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# The Indian Armed Forces’ Sikh and Non-Sikh Officers’ Opinions of Operation Blue Star\*

Apurba Kundu

## INTRODUCTION

THE GREAT MUTINY OF 1857 caused the British to reexamine the recruitment of Indian soldiers into the three respective presidency armies of Bengal, Bombay and Madras. Despite repeated recommendations that these forces henceforth be composed of “different nationalities and castes . . . mixed promiscuously through each regiment”<sup>1</sup> as a classic “divide and rule” precaution, regimental commanders soon began favouring recruitment of men from north and northwest India. Here were communities which, for any number of reasons, British officers identified as having greater war-like characteristics than the central and southern peoples who had made up the bulk of pre-Great Mutiny troops.<sup>2</sup> The communal character of the Indian Army (unified in 1893) became entrenched with the introduction of “class” and “class company” regiments; the former made up of the same caste, or ethnic group, the latter with a different class in each of its three companies.

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<sup>1</sup> Great Britain, *Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into the Organisation of the Indian Army; together with the Minutes of Evidence and Appendix*, CND. 2515, 1859, as used in Stephen P. Cohen, *The Indian Army — Its Contribution to the Development of a Nation* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1971), p. 38.

<sup>2</sup> The British felt the subcontinent’s prerecorded history showed that certain communities were habituated to military service while others had lost all martial abilities. In addition, indigenous religious beliefs such as Hinduism’s specific warrior (*kshatriya*) caste were cited as predating British recruitment patterns by thousands of years. As climate was thought to affect fighting ability, so soldiers from the cold, hard north were preferred to those from the hot, enervating south. The geography of military actions — limited from 1857 to World War I mainly to the subcontinent’s northwest border — were used to argue that only troops drawn from this region were capable of facing the fierce local enemies. Soldiers’ parade presentation also counted; British commanders seeking an idealized image of soldiers as tall, fair and sturdy favoured men who in India are found chiefly in the north and northwest. Finally, officers sought out the rural male, the yeoman and peasant farmer, plentiful in the north and northwest, whom they felt were much more easily impressed, trained and unquestioning of orders than more well off and somewhat educated soldiers such as the Bengal Army’s high-caste Brahmins who had made up a large proportion of participants in the Great Mutiny.

Despite an official post-Independence policy of recruitment open to all,<sup>3</sup> the Indian Army continued to enlist men from the north and north-west in numbers disproportionate to their respective communities' share of the national population. Maj. Gen. D. K. Palit describes how "many die-hard senior Indian officers" strongly resisted completely unbiased recruitment after Independence: "Brainwashed by long years of service under British officers, they firmly believed in the efficacy of tribal *esprit de corps*." The immediate post-Independence conflict in Jammu and Kashmir followed by years of Indo-Pakistani and Sino-Indian tension further "inhibited the government from enforcing radical changes in the organisation of the fighting arms." Thus, writes Palit, while most "tail" units and all post-Independence raisings such as the Parachute Regiment have been constituted on an all-India basis, the majority of the Indian Army's "teeth" arms remain the preserve of personnel drawn from the north and northwest.<sup>4</sup>

Yet the continued recruitment and posting together of men drawn from specific communities may endanger both the Indian Army's corporate cohesiveness and even the country's continued civilian supremacy-of-rule. Any issue which strongly affects one member of a group united by ethnicity, community, religion and/or region may readily affect them all. If so motivated, the men and officers of one or more of the Indian Army's favoured communities may prove numerous enough to preserve, protect and/or enlarge their own group interests to the detriment of the military as a whole. Such related personnel may also provide a more fertile ground for spreading any existing antigovernment grievances which, in the extreme case, can lead to a military coup d'état.

The potential dangers posed by specific communities of personnel within the Indian Army disagreeing with and then reacting against government policy as a self-interested group will be shown in the following examination of Sikh and non-Sikh officers' opinions of the responsibility for, and necessity of, 1984's Operation Blue Star, and the armed forces'

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<sup>3</sup> In 1949, Indian Army Commander in Chief K. M. Cariappa formally scrapped the concept of favouring specific communities in recruitment. In 1953, the government adopted a policy (further modified ten years later) which disallowed any one state from having a dominant position in military recruitment. During Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's period of emergency rule a circular was issued undertaking to enlist armed forces' personnel in proportion to their state's share of the national population. See Stephen P. Cohen, "The Military and Indian Democracy," in *India's Democracy: An Analysis of Changing State-Society Relations*, ed. A. Kohli (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 133; V. I. Longor, *Red Coats to Olive Green — A History of the Indian Army 1600–1974* (Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1974), pp. 288–89; K. C. Praval, *Indian Army After Independence* (New Delhi: Lancer International, 1987), pp. 133–34, 602–604; and Kuldip Nayar and Khushwant Singh, *Tragedy of Punjab Operation Bluestar & After* (New Delhi: Vision Books, incorporating Orient Paperbacks, 1984), pp. 45–46.

<sup>4</sup> Major General D. K. Palit, *War in High Himalaya — The Indian Army in Crisis, 1962* (London: Hurst & Company, 1991), p. 12.

mutinies which followed. I do not mean to single out Sikhs as the sole example of a recruited community whose views on intra- or extra-military issues are sometimes at odds with those of their comrades. However, the sheer numbers and visibility of Sikh military personnel make them the most obvious candidates for investigation.

#### SIKH MILITARY PERSONNEL

One of the most numerous and successful of the Indian Army's recruited communities are the Sikhs of Punjab. Their high standing among British recruiters was reflected in the rise of Punjabi infantry units (including Sikh and non-Sikh personnel) between 1862 and 1914 from a fifth to almost half the Indian Army total.<sup>5</sup> Sikhs themselves had by the turn of the century made up over a quarter of Punjab's contribution to the army, despite accounting for less than 6 percent of the province's population in 1911.<sup>6</sup> While recruiting difficulties during the interwar years lessened Punjabi enlistment, Sikhs still constituted a quarter of all army personnel during World War II.<sup>7</sup>

Although post-Independence governments refuse to release the religious and/or ethnic origins of Indian military personnel, the army apparently continues to recruit and post Punjabi Sikh soldiers in much the same pre-1947 patterns. Punjabis (Sikhs and non-Sikhs) continue to account for 10–15 percent of all ranks in the Indian Army despite the state containing just 2.45 percent of India's national population in 1981.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, with the exception of Gurkhas (recruited in Nepal), Sikhs remain the only community to have infantry regiments drawn exclusively from their own numbers: the Sikh Regiment (manned, though not officered, by high-caste Jat Sikhs) and the Sikh Light Infantry (manned entirely by Mazhabi, or Scheduled Caste, "untouchable" Sikhs.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Over the same period, the combined contribution from Bombay, Madras and the area east of the Yamuna River (which flows south from the Himalayas to Delhi and then southeast to join the Ganges River at Allahabad) fell from three-quarters of the Indian Army's total number of infantry units to just over a third, while military recruitment of the segment of Nepal's population known as Gurkhas leapt from less than 5 percent to almost a fifth. Figures adapted from *Recruiting in India Before and During the War of 1914–1918* (India: Army Headquarters, October 1919), p. 7, as used in Cohen, *The Indian Army*, p. 44.

<sup>6</sup> Figures compiled from Government of India, *1921 Census Report, Punjab*, pt. 1, p. 178, as used in Rajiv A. Kapur, *Sikh Separatism — The Politics of Faith* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1987, first published by Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1986), p. 24; and Kapur, *Sikh Separatism*, p. 25.

<sup>7</sup> Cohen, "The Military," p. 132.

<sup>8</sup> See Cohen, "The Military," p. 133; P. Padmanabha, Registrar General & Census Commissioner for India, *Census of India 1981 Series-1 India Paper 1 of 1982 Final Population Tables*, p. vii; and Mark Tully and Satish Jacob, *Amritsar — Mrs. Gandhi's Last Battle* (Calcutta: Rupa & Co. by arrangement with Pan Books, London, 1985), p. 194.

<sup>9</sup> See Cohen, "The Military," p. 132; and Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, p. 194.

Punjabi Sikhs continue to follow a tradition of being even more disproportionately represented in the Indian Army's officer corps. Over 40 percent of the first eighty-five Indians admitted by the British into the Royal Military College (RMC) from 1919–25 as prospective commissioned officers were from a Punjab which accounted for just 6.5 percent of India's 1921 population.<sup>10</sup> Although the Indian Military Academy (IMA) was created in part to admit a wider cross-section of Indian youth, its first ten regular courses saw a Punjab with less than 7 percent of the 1931 national population again contributing over 40 percent of officer cadets.<sup>11</sup> The preponderance of Sikhs among RMC and IMA cadets became more apparent after Partition caused the vast majority of Punjab's (and other areas') Muslim officers to opt for Pakistan: in 1962 almost 40 percent (30 of 79) of the Indian Army's brigadiers and over 45 percent (13 of 28) of its major generals were Sikhs.<sup>12</sup> A Punjab with just 2.45 percent of India's population in 1981 still accounted for over 10 percent of all cadets attending the IMA's ten regular courses from 1978–82.<sup>13</sup> A 1991 report estimates that Sikhs themselves continue to constitute a fifth of all Indian Army officers.<sup>14</sup> Sikhs also make up "perhaps a quarter" of Indian Air Force pilots (all officers) and "substantial numbers" of the Indian Navy.<sup>15</sup>

#### OPERATION BLUE STAR

The military action code-named Operation Blue Star was the central government's belated, if overwrought, response to the increasing

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<sup>10</sup> Figures compiled from unpublished documents — "A Nominal Roll of Indian Gentlemen Cadets Attending the Royal Military College at Sandhurst Between 1 January 1919 and 31 December 1927," "Seniority Roll of Indian Gentlemen Cadets Attending the Royal Military College at Sandhurst Between 1 January 1919 and 31 December 1927," "Summary of India Gentlemen Cadets at the RMC Between Jan. 1919 and Dec. 1927" — taken from the "Registrar of Gentleman Cadets of the Royal Military College from 1919 to 1927" by Dr. T. A. Heathcote, curator, The Royal Military Academy Sandhurst Collection, and given to me in correspondence in 1990; J. H. Hutton, *Census of India, 1931 Vol. I — India Part I — Report* (Delhi: Manager of Publications, 1933), p. 35; and Longer, *Red Coats*, p. 196.

<sup>11</sup> Figures compiled from Lt. Gen. Dr. M. L. Chibber, *Military Leadership to Prevent Military Coup* (New Delhi: Lancer International, 1986), p. 40; and Hutton, *Census of India*, p. 35. (I have corrected the arithmetical/typographical errors in lines 1, 3, 7–12, 15, and the total shown in Chibber's table of figures on p. 40.)

<sup>12</sup> Dr. H. A. Rivzi, "Sikhs and the Indian Army," *The Muslim* (Islamabad), 29 April 1984, as used in Cohen, "The Military," p. 134.

<sup>13</sup> Figures compiled from Chibber, *Military Leadership* (New Delhi: Lancer International, 1986), p. 41; and Padmanabha, *Census*, p. vii.

<sup>14</sup> Tim McGirk, "When religious strife threatens regimental pride," *The Independent* (London), 11 February 1991.

<sup>15</sup> Cohen, "The Military", p. 132.

militancy of Jarnail Singh, or Sant (Saint), Bhindranwale and his followers.<sup>16</sup> Bhindranwale himself was reportedly plucked from the obscure position of Damdami Temple leader by Sanjay Gandhi and ex-Punjab Chief Minister Zail Singh in the hope that the post-1977 anti-Congress(I) coalition in Punjab could be weakened by promoting a radical new Sikh leader to discredit the moderate Sikh religious party, the Akali Dal.<sup>17</sup> In his first public act, Bhindranwale incited an attack on the Amritsar congress of the “heretical” Sikh sect of Nirankaris resulting in over a dozen deaths.<sup>18</sup> Yet the Congress(I) publicity machine portrayed him as a hero and in return, Bhindranwale openly campaigned for Congress(I) candidates in the 1980 general elections, once even sharing a dais with Indira Gandhi.<sup>19</sup>

After Indira Gandhi’s return to power in that year, Bhindranwale used the apparent central government protection of his increasingly militant activities to great effect. Twice suspected of involvement in the killings of prominent opponents to his increasing militancy, he was twice allowed to walk free after appeals from (now) Home Minister Zail Singh.<sup>20</sup> Bhindranwale’s second release was a turning point. He was now seen as the one militant Sikh leader capable of openly defying the government, and his erstwhile political “handlers” — (soon to be President) Zail Singh, Indira Gandhi and her think tank for Punjab which included her son

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<sup>16</sup> Operation Blue Star may also be seen to have been the central government’s cumulative reaction to a long history of political, socioeconomic and religious agitation by the Sikhs of Punjab. See Government of India, *White Paper on the Punjab Agitation* (New Delhi: n.p., 10 July 1984), pp. 5–22; Kapur, *Sikh Separatism*, pp. 1–172; Nayar and Singh, *Tragedy*, pp. 19–29; and Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, pp. 36–51.

<sup>17</sup> Sanjay and Zail Singh conspired to promote Bhindranwale by forming a new Sikh political party, the Dal Khalsa, which from its inception advocated transforming Punjab into an independent Sikh state of Khalistan. While the Dal Khalsa became known as Bhindranwale’s party, he himself never formally joined any political organization. See Kapur, *Sikh Separatism*, p. 235; Nayar and Singh, *Tragedy*, pp. 23–25, 32–34; and Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, pp. 54–58, 60.

<sup>18</sup> Accounts of the exact number killed vary. Nayar and Singh write variously: “Thirteen people were killed” and “Sixteen Sikhs died in the clash.” Tully and Jacob describe how “twelve Sikhs and three Nirankaris were killed.” See Nayar and Singh, *Tragedy*, pp. 26, 32; and Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, p. 59.

<sup>19</sup> See Nayar and Singh, *Tragedy*, pp. 36–37; and Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, p. 59, 61–62.

<sup>20</sup> Named by police as a suspect in the shooting death of the Nirankari Guru, Baba Gurbachan Singh, in April 1980, Bhindranwale took refuge in the Golden Temple hostel until Zail Singh assured Parliament of his innocence. Five months later, when the police named Bhindranwale as a conspirator in the killing of newspaper personality Lala Jagat Narain, he was allowed to flee from Haryana to a Punjab *guruwara*, allegedly with the connivance of Congress(I) Haryana Chief Minister Bhajan Lal. Although Bhindranwale surrendered to police five days later, Zail Singh again told Parliament he was innocent and he was freed without benefit of a court order. “Zail Singh,” write Mark Tully and Satish Jacob, “wanted Bhindranwale freed because he still believed he could use him to bring about the downfall of his rival, the Punjab Chief Minister. Mrs. Gandhi apparently wanted him released so she could maintain the hold over Delhi’s Sikhs.” See Nayar and Singh, *Tragedy*, pp. 37, 40–43; and Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, pp. 65–71.

Rajiv Gandhi and a selection of top politicians and civil servants — would no longer be able to influence his actions.<sup>21</sup>

While the professedly nonviolent Akali Dal had eventually allied itself with Bhindranwale as a means of pressuring Prime Minister Indira Gandhi during their tortuous negotiations over the 1973 Anandpur Sahib Resolution and other issues,<sup>22</sup> it too became incapable of controlling his behaviour. Bhindranwale had sworn an oath of loyalty and obedience to Harchand Singh Longowal, the most powerful of the Akali Dal's leadership trio, during the party's successful *rasta roko* (block roads) campaign of April 1983.<sup>23</sup> Yet it was Longowal himself who, fearful for his own safety, used the Sikh splinter group Babbar Khalsa to push Bhindranwale and his followers out of Amritsar's Golden Temple hostel and into the temple complex itself some six weeks later.<sup>24</sup>

Bhindranwale's strategy of violence was meant to create communal tension sufficient both to drive Hindus from Punjab and to provoke a national backlash which would force Sikhs living elsewhere<sup>25</sup> to seek the safety of their "home" state. In 1982 the Lok Sabha had passed a special resolution expressing "deep anguish and concern" over the situation in Punjab.<sup>26</sup> By 1983, write Mark Tully and Satish Jacob, "All . . . [Bhindranwale's] terrorists were known by name to the shopkeepers and the householders who live in the narrow alleys surrounding the Golden Temple. . . . The Punjab police must have known who they were also, but they made no attempt to arrest them. By this time Bhindranwale and his men were above the law."<sup>27</sup>

The level of violence escalated. On 23 April 1983, Punjab Police Deputy Inspector General (DIG) A. S. Atwal was shot dead while on his way out of the Golden Temple complex; on 5 October Sikh militants hijacked a local bus, separated the Hindu and Sikh passengers and shot

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<sup>21</sup> See Nayar and Singh, *Tragedy*, p. 43; and Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, pp. 71, 89–90, 119, 137.

<sup>22</sup> Akali Dal demands included restricting the central government's powers over Punjab's defence, foreign policy, currency and communications, guaranteeing the state's river water rights, granting it sole possession of Chandigarh as the state capital, and amending Article 25 of the Constitution of India to recognize Sikh religious institutions as separate from those of Hindus. In August 1982, after yet another round of negotiations with the central government had broken down, the Akali Dal joined with Bhindranwale in a *morcha* (movement) which led Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to release all jailed Akali agitators and reopen talks. For a variety of reasons for which neither party is blameless, these and three subsequent negotiations failed. See GOI, *White Paper on the Punjab Agitation*, pp. 20–22; Kapur, *Sikh Separatism*, pp. 228–29; Nayar and Singh, *Tragedy*, pp. 23, 26–27, 34, 44–50, 82–88; and Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, pp. 45–50, 74–78, 81–83, 87–90.

<sup>23</sup> Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, p. 95.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 110–11, 114.

<sup>25</sup> Approximately 20 percent of India's Sikhs live outside Punjab. See Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, p. 80.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 94–95.

the former, killing six; on 18 November another bus was hijacked, the passengers again separated by religion and four Hindus shot dead. Although Indira Gandhi imposed president's (i.e., direct) rule in Punjab on 6 October, the killings spiralled out of control.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, with Bhindranwale openly fortifying the Golden Temple complex and his followers firing on the paramilitary Central Reserve Police (CRP) forces surrounding them, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi sent the Indian Army into Punjab on 2 June 1984. By the next day it had surrounded thirty-eight *gurudwaras* (Sikh temples) believed to be harbouring Sikh militants under the command of Bhindranwale, including the Golden Temple and hostel complex where he and a large number of his followers were sheltered.<sup>29</sup>

Operation Blue Star commenced on 5 June. Eschewing a prolonged siege of the Golden Temple and hostel complex for fear of provoking a state-wide uprising, the commander of the army in Punjab, Lt. Gen. (later General) K. Sundarji, ordered a nighttime attack to flush out Bhindranwale and his followers. In the first move, Para Commandos extricated a number of Sikh moderates from the hostel complex under heavy fire. Leading elements of 10 Guards Regiment then stormed the main entrance, only to encounter withering machine gun fire and grenades thrown from concealed positions. The Para Commandos and Special Frontier Force units which were simultaneously attacking the heavily fortified *Akal Takht* (Eternal Throne, the symbol of Sikhism's temporal power) met similar difficulties, as did personnel of 26 Madras Regiment when attempting to link up with the former two. (The militants demonstrated their firepower by immobilizing an army armoured personnel carrier with an anti-tank weapon.) Nor did the inducement of units of 9 Garhwal Rifles and 15 Kumaon bring the operation back on schedule. Desperate to complete the action by daybreak, Sundarji now sought — and received — Delhi's permission to use tank fire to neutralize the *Akal Takht* defences. Although sniper fire would continue throughout the next day, this move effectively ended the militant's defiance.<sup>30</sup>

Operation Blue Star left many scars. The approximately one thousand army personnel involved in the unexpectedly ferocious fighting endured a very high one-third casualty rate of 4 officers and 79 men killed,

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<sup>28</sup> See GOI, *White Paper on the Punjab Agitation*, Annexure VII, pp. 110–62; Kapur, *Sikh Separatism*, pp. 227–29; Nayar and Singh, *Tragedy*, pp. 75–78, 89; and Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, pp. 96–99, 104–108, 122–26, 139.

<sup>29</sup> See Nayar, *Tragedy*, p. 79; GOI, *White Paper on the Punjab Agitation*, pp. 43–45; and Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, pp. 119, 124–26, 143, 152.

<sup>30</sup> See Shekar Gupta, "Crackdown in Punjab Operation Bluestar [sic]," *India Today* (New Delhi), 30 June 1984, pp. 8–21; Shekar Gupta, "Operation Bluestar [sic] Night of Blood," *India Today*, 15 August 1984, pp. 30–33; and "The Blue Star Story," an extract from Lt. Gen. K. S. Brar, *Operation Blue Star: The True Story* to be published by UBS Publishers' Distributors, in *India Today*, 15 May 1993, pp. 50–55.



12 officers and 237 men wounded. The subsequent government White Paper also stated that the militants suffered 493 dead — including Bhindranwale himself — and 86 injured, figures still much disputed.<sup>31</sup> While the Golden Temple itself (the *Hari Mandir*, or Temple of God) sustained little damage — army forces had been under strict orders to avoid damaging it — the *Akal Takht* was almost destroyed and the precious Golden Temple library set on fire.<sup>32</sup> Both sides are reported to have committed atrocities during the battle, especially on the unarmed civilians caught in the middle of the fight for the Golden Temple hostel complex.<sup>33</sup>

#### OFFICERS' SAMPLE GROUP

Unless otherwise noted, tables 1–4 below are based on the comments of ninety-six senior retired Indian officers from all three defence services as expressed on a questionnaire distributed in 1987 and 1989, and in follow-up interviews conducted in India, the U.K. and U.S.A. in 1988 and 1990.<sup>34</sup> Although India's extremely tight secrecy laws, lack of any official list of military officers, and the universal reluctance of military officers to discuss sensitive political issues limited the sample group *per force* to officers drawn from various nonofficial sources and personal referrals, its 5:1 mix of non-Sikh:Sikh officers is closely representative of the army's current ratio as described above. Tables 1–4 divide the officers into the three categories of "All," "non-Sikh" (63 Hindus, 6 "no religion," 5 Christians, 1 Muslim, 1 Buddhist, 1 Zoroastrian, 2 "all religions," and 1 "no answer"), and "Sikh" (16). The 96 non-Sikh/Sikh officers are closely matched by rank; consisting of 18/1 lieutenant generals, 11/6 major generals, 34/4 brigadiers, 2/0 colonels, 3/2 lieutenant colonels, 1/0 admiral and 3/0 vice admirals, 2/1 air chief marshals, 3/1 air marshals, 1/1 group captains, and 1/0 wing commander. The rank of the 1/0 officer is not given. The sample group also moved through the military together: 2 percent were commissioned during the interwar years, 35 percent during World War II, and 43 percent after Independence (20 percent did not give the date of their joining); while 2 percent retired in the 1950s, 8 percent in the sixties, 36 percent in the seventies, and 52 percent in the eighties (2 percent did not give their date of retirement).

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<sup>31</sup> See GOI, *White Paper on the Punjab Agitation*, Annexure XI, p. 169; and Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, pp. 183–85.

<sup>32</sup> See Nayar and Singh, *Tragedy*, pp. 92–105; "The Blue Star Story," p. 50; and Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, pp. 160–83.

<sup>33</sup> See Gupta, "Operation Bluestar [sic] Night of Blood," p. 33; Nayar and Singh, *Tragedy*, p. 93; and Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, pp. 155–59.

<sup>34</sup> The questionnaire and interviews form part of my ongoing doctoral research on Indian civil/military issues at the University of London School of Economics and Political Science, Department of Government.

OFFICERS' OPINIONS OF THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR  
AND NECESSITY OF OPERATION BLUE STAR

The Indian armed forces' Sikh and non-Sikh officers differ markedly in their opinion of the centre's responsibility for the situation which led to Operation Blue Star. See table 1: "How large a part did the Central Government play in creating the circumstances where army action became a real possibility in Punjab? Select one." (The relatively limited comments in table 1 result from officers being asked only to select the phrase which best describes their view.)

Not one Sikh officer selects choice (1): "None at All/The Central Government was simply responding to events outside its control." A tiny minority (5 percent) of non-Sikh officers, however, think the centre entirely blameless for the events leading up to Operation Blue Star.

Moreover, while no Sikh officers agree that the centre was only partially responsible, fully 25 percent of their non-Sikh counterparts believe (2): "A Little/The Central Government was somewhat negligent in its attention to the problems in Punjab." For instance, while acknowledging that part of the Punjab crisis can be traced to the post-Independence "letdown" felt by a "small percentage" of the Sikh community

TABLE I  
HOW LARGE A PART DID THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT  
PLAY IN CREATING THE CIRCUMSTANCES WHERE ARMY ACTION  
BECAME A REAL POSSIBILITY IN PUNJAB? SELECT ONE.

Officers	All	Non-Sikh	Sikh
	Percent (No.)		
None at All/The central government was simply responding to events outside its control.	4% (4)	5% (4)	0% (0)
A Little/The central government was somewhat negligent in its attention to the problems in Punjab.	21% (20)	25% (20)	0% (0)
A Fair Bit/The central government's mismanagement of events helped fuel the crisis.	32% (31)	31% (25)	38% (6)
A Lot/The central government's bad decisions were to a great extent directly responsible for the deterioration of law and order.	34% (33)	30% (24)	56% (9)
No Answer	8% (8)	9% (7)	6% (1)
Total	99% (96)	100% (80)	100% (16)

who are no longer treated as a “special people” as they were under the British, non-Sikh Lieutenant General 19 argues that the need for Operation Blue Star arose mainly from a “totally terrorist movement” made up of “uneducated, unemployed, landless youth” who had become “basically smugglers.”

Non-Sikh and Sikh officers in close agreement over choice (3): “A Fair Bit/The Central Government’s mismanagement of events helped fuel the crisis.” Thirty-one percent of the former agreed with this statement as did 38 percent of the latter.

The differences between non-Sikh and Sikh officers are again pronounced in their respective selections of (4): “A Lot/The Central Government’s bad decisions were to a great extent directly responsible for the deterioration of law and order.” Thirty percent of the former compared to 56 percent of the latter feel this to be a fair statement. Non-Sikh Brigadier 44 alters (4) to read: “A Lot/The Central Government’s total connivance with unhealthy political practices were directly responsible for the deterioration of law and order and the total collapse of the political system.” He adds that “Indira Gandhi then made one of the prime culprits the President of India and inducted the other[?] into the Rajya Sabha.” Sikh Brigadier 60 describes how “the Central Government was entirely responsible for creating this situation in Punjab . . . the Central Government, the Congress(I) and the Chief Minister of Punjab encouraged and set up Bhindranwale with a view to destroy the Akali [Dal] party and create a rift between Hindus and Sikh so that they could get all the Hindu votes for the Congress(I).”

Bhindranwale, says Sikh Air Marshal 3, was an “extremely short-sighted” creation of Indira Gandhi, her “toady follower” Zail Singh and Sanjay Gandhi.

Non-Sikh and Sikh officers continue to differ when asked if the “foreign hand” played any part in the deterioration of law and order in Punjab. See table 2: “Can any of the current trouble in Punjab be blamed on foreign support?” (Remember, these officers were asked this question at various times between 1987 and 1990, inclusive.)

Almost four times as many Sikh (19 percent) as non-Sikh (5 percent) officers see “No” foreign contribution to Punjab’s problems. “Arms,” writes Sikh Lieutenant General 56, “can be obtained in a variety of ways by anyone able to pay the required price. I do not believe that there is any active foreign support.” Sikh Major General 67 concurs, writing that the current sad state of affairs “is essentially mal-handling [sic] and lack of will on the part of Central Government to face the realities of situation and climate prevailing in Punjab.” Non-Sikh Major General 52 says that “It is solely of our own doing . . . Pakistan may be interfering a little bit but it is low-key. She is not prepared for the risks involved — political and military.”

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TABLE 2  
CAN ANY OF THE CURRENT TROUBLE IN PUNJAB  
BE BLAMED ON FOREIGN SUPPORT?

Officers	All	Non-Sikh	Sikh
	Percent (No.)		
No	7% (7)	5% (4)	19% (3)
Yes	84% (81)	88% (70)	69% (11)
Definitely	72% (58)	73% (51)	64% (7)
Possibly	28% (23)	27% (19)	36% (4)
No Answer	8% (8)	8% (6)	13% (2)
Total	99% (96)	101% (80)	101% (16)

Large majorities, however, of both non-Sikh (88 percent) and Sikh (69 percent) officers say the foreign hand has a role in Punjab's troubles. Like the vast majority in the "Yes, Definitely" subsets of non-Sikh (73 percent) and Sikh (64 percent) officers, non-Sikh Lieutenant General 94 has no doubt "Pakistan is behind this agitation. The government has full details of the camps where terrorists are being trained in Pakistan. [The] names of Pak officers who train them, details of the type of training imparted including infiltration training, weapons and equipment are fully known to us. A number of terrorists who have received such training are now in government custody. So there is no question of any conjectures. Pak is doing this to destabilize India."

"Considering what we have done to Pakistan," argues Sikh Brigadier 60 in a view shared by many officers, "i.e., knocked out half of their country . . . they will like to do the same to us. Pakistan is behind Punjab and they will keep doing their best to create the maximum trouble for us."

A number of officers also cite other foreign hands interfering in Punjab. A non-Sikh vice admiral argues that China is involved ("in return for Indian interference in NEFA and Arunachal Pradesh") while a Sikh major general claims that the United States is involved as the U.S. is "never averse to bringing down India a peg or two. Our criticism [of American policy] and attitude irks them no end." A Non-Sikh Brigadier 28 sees "imperialist powers" involved.

The "Yes, Possibly" subsets of non-Sikh (27 percent) and Sikh (36 percent) officers are not completely convinced of outside interference in Punjab. "Fishing in troubled waters is going on," admits non-Sikh Air Marshal 5, "however I do not believe that the contribution of these foreign hand or hands is in any sense decisive or even substantial in keeping

the pot boiling.” “No doubt foreign support has been there,” agrees non-Sikh Lieutenant General 10, “but that in itself is a measure of the failure of government to discharge its responsibility.” Indeed, says Sikh Brigadier 39, “why blame anyone else if one can’t look after one’s own house? In world politics other powers will take advantages of what is happening in India.” “There is no escaping the fact,” concludes non-Sikh Brigadier 40, that “the trouble itself arose purely as a result of politicking within the country.”

The differences between non-Sikh and Sikh officers’ respective opinions as to the need for army action in Amritsar could hardly be greater. See table 3: “Was Operation Blue Star Absolutely Necessary?”

Whereas only one Sikh officer agrees the centre was justified in calling in the military, fully 68 percent of non-Sikh officers agree. “The police and paramilitary forces were incapable of dealing with the situation by themselves,” argues non-Sikh Brigadier 31. “A place of worship,” continues non-Sikh Vice Admiral 6, “was used to shelter criminals . . . aimed at destabilizing the government.” For non-Sikh Major General 34 the situation could not have been more grave: “[T]he Sikh militancy had gathered a vast quantity of arms and ammunition through the connivance of the Sikh police and Sikh civil service in Punjab. Further they had let loose a reign of terror and were on the verge of committing genocide of the Hindu population in Punjab.” Non-Sikh Air Marshal 7 agrees that the centre had to act, “otherwise Bhindranwale’s followers would have driven all the Hindus out of Punjab and established Khalistan.” “A point was reached,” concludes non-Sikh Lieutenant General 4, “where the police were ineffective, it was now a question of the Central Government asserting its authority or else abdicating power.”

While “All” of the “Yes” officers agree with non-Sikh Air Chief Marshal 18 that “at the time it [Operation Blue Star] was taken it had become necessary,” many nevertheless criticize the centre’s lackadaisical approach to Punjab’s problems. The lone Sikh “Yes” officer, Major General 96, argues “action was necessary but the amount of force used

TABLE 3  
WAS OPERATION BLUE STAR ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY?

Officers	All	Non-Sikh	Sikh
	Percent (No.)		
Yes	57% (55)	68% (54)	6% (1)
No	36% (35)	26% (21)	88% (14)
No Answer	6% (6)	6% (5)	6% (1)
Total	99% (96)	100% (80)	100% (16)

was excessive. In fact action should have been taken earlier when it was within the capability of the police to handle. Even at that late stage the police should have been allowed to commence with the army standing by." Non-Sikh Lieutenant General 19 feels "Operation Blue Star could have been handled by civil authorities. Civilian administration was very soft . . . passed on their responsibility to the army. This is typical of a civilian administration which is too quick to call out the military." Other non-Sikh officers complain that "the government should have acted when Police DIG Atwal was shot dead on the steps of the Golden Temple" (Brigadier 69), that the authorities "could have tried to force militants out rather than attempt to storm the temple" (Brigadier 22), and that "instead of the Army, the Govt. should have used paramilitary forces" (Lieutenant General 94).

Many of the "All" "Yes" officers also sympathize with their Sikh brethren. For non-Sikh Lieutenant General 23, "the Sikh community's [highly negative] reaction to the desecration of the holy temple was understandable." Operation Blue Star, adds non-Sikh Vice Admiral 8, "hurt the psyche of a [Sikh] community." Such army action, concludes non-Sikh Brigadier 9, is "not to be repeated again."

Indeed, 26 percent of non-Sikh officers say, "No," Operation Blue Star was not absolutely necessary. "The civil administration should have acted in time to prevent [or] defuse the crisis," writes non-Sikh Major General 32. Stopping Bhindranwale, argues non-Sikh Lieutenant General 35, "should have been entrusted to police or paramilitary forces as a law and order problem." For non-Sikh Colonel 24, "an equivalently strong police action should have been taken earlier, later, then, now and in future." That the government did not consider this option, writes non-Sikh Brigadier 44, "was a failure of the highest levels of the IPS [Indian Police Service] officers. The DG [Director General] CRP at the time must obviously have stated that it was beyond his and the CRP's capabilities to handle the situation; he was then, incidentally, promoted to become a Lieutenant Governor as a reward for failing in his duty to the nation."

Non-Sikh Lieutenant Colonel 80 criticizes the army itself: "[Operation] Blue Star was the brainchild of a general in whose ability the then PM had considerable faith. That this general [Sundarji?] had hawkish ideas was of little consequence. Tanks should not have been used and jawans should have been deployed with more concern regarding their survival."

Non-Sikh Brigadier 55 argues that any overt use of force simply "could have been avoided by judicial cutting off of electricity, water and food" to the terrorists ensconced in the Golden Temple complex.

Except for "Yes" Sikh Major General 96 above, every (88 percent) Sikh officer offering an opinion says, "No" to the necessity of Operation

Blue Star. Many agree with Sikh Brigadier 91's comment that the authorities "could have achieved the same aim by political decisions without the help of military forces." "Other means should have been tried before the drastic use of force," continues Sikh Lieutenant Colonel 11, "such as: (a) creating rifts within various factions of the Sikhs, [and] (b) perfect intelligence." Sikh Brigadier 60 thinks the "Sikh community should have been asked to get Bhindranwale out of the Golden Temple complex. If the Akali [Dal] party was not prepared to do so, other prominent Sikh citizens of Punjab should have [been] asked to do it."

Other "No" Sikh officers seek to apportion blame for creating a situation where Operation Blue Star needed to be considered. "If the Central Government had not actually encouraged Bhindranwale initially, until he got out of hand, the situation would never have arisen at all," writes Sikh Lieutenant General 56. "The Golden Temple and Akal Takht could have been completely isolated by the Police as soon as it became known what was going on." The "villain of the piece," adds Sikh Air Marshal 3, "was the Central Government — Indira Gandhi, her advisors and the Congress, which in effect created Bhindranwale." "Army action was not necessary," concludes Sikh Major General 75. "A situation was created for this eventuality to win votes of majority community."

Their responses in tables 1–3 show non-Sikh and Sikh officers to be sharply divided over the responsibility for and necessity of Operation Blue Star. In table 1, 30 percent (5 percent "None at All" plus 25 percent "A Little") of non-Sikh officers think the central government relatively blameless for the deterioration of law and order in Punjab while *every* Sikh officer offering an opinion holds the centre largely responsible. While the central government may find comfort in the large majorities of both non-Sikh (86 percent) and Sikh (69 percent) officers in table 2 who perceive at least some foreign interference in Punjab, it must also be noted that almost four times as many Sikh (19 percent) as non-Sikh (5 percent) officers see no foreign hand at all. Indeed, 66 percent (32 percent "A Fair Bit" plus 34 percent "A Lot") of "All" officers in table 1 think the central government was itself largely to blame for creating the circumstances where army action became a real possibility in Punjab. Finally, although 57 percent of all officers say "yes" to the absolute necessity of Operation Blue Star, this majority is almost entirely the result of non-Sikh officers' views. For, with one exception, *every* (88 percent) Sikh officer offering an opinion disagrees with the need for the army's storming of the Golden Temple and hostel complex. The question now is will the stark difference between non-Sikh and Sikh opinion over the responsibility for, and necessity of, Operation Blue Star affect internal military discipline?

POST-OPERATION BLUE STAR MUTINIES

Two years before Operation Blue Star, the central government had been “thoroughly alarmed”<sup>35</sup> to learn that “several thousand”<sup>36</sup> Sikh ex-servicemen, including senior officers, had answered Longowal’s call to attend a Golden Temple complex meeting to discuss ways of remedying Delhi’s failure to address Akali Dal demands. Many of these men had been greatly upset when security measures imposed for the 1982 Asian Games resulted in the arrest of over fifteen hundred Sikhs and the brutal stop and search on the Punjab/Haryana border of countless others — including retired officers Air Chief Marshal Arjan Singh, Lieutenant General Jagjit Singh Aurora and Major General Shahbeg Singh — on their way to Delhi.<sup>37</sup> For “the first time,” write Kuldip Nayar and Khushwant Singh, these men “had been suspect simply because they were Sikhs.”<sup>38</sup>

Although nonviolent options were debated, Bhindranwale’s argument that only force would achieve success persuaded Major General Jaswant Singh Bhullar and Major General Shahbeg Singh to join him. Bhullar played a relatively minor role, leaving the Golden Temple complex just before Operation Blue Star.<sup>39</sup> Shahbeg Singh, an expert on insurgency warfare hailed as a hero for training the Mukhti Bahini (the underground force instrumental in winning the 1971 Bangladesh War), was a more valuable recruit. Bitter about his dismissal from the Indian Army on three corruption charges one day before he was due to retire (he subsequently won two civil court cases in an effort to clear his name) and humiliated by his treatment on the Punjab/Haryana border as described above, Shahbeg Singh had increasingly turned to religion for solace. He soon became Bhindranwale’s chief military advisor, expertly organizing the fortification of the Golden Temple.<sup>40</sup> While few other

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<sup>35</sup> Cohen, “The Military,” p. 89.

<sup>36</sup> The meeting took place on 23 January 1982. Estimates of the numbers of ex-servicemen attending the meeting vary widely. “Several thousand” is the figure reported by Cohen, while Nayar says “2000 men attended.” Tully and Jacob write: “Journalists put the figure at 5000 but [Narinderjit Singh] Nanda [the public relations officer of the Shriomani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee present at the gathering] said it was nearer 30,000.” See Cohen, “The Military,” p. 135; Nayar and Singh, *Tragedy*, pp. 66; and Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, pp. 31, 89.

<sup>37</sup> See Cohen, “The Military,” pp. 134–35; Nayar and Singh, *Tragedy*, pp. 63–66; and Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, pp. 84–89. In the above sources Maj. Gen. Shahbeg Singh is variously spelt as “Shahbeg” and “Shabeg.” I am using Tully and Jacob’s spelling of Shahbeg.

<sup>38</sup> Nayar and Singh, *Tragedy*, pp. 66.

<sup>39</sup> Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, p. 89. Although Bhullar went on to organize pro-Khalistan propaganda efforts in the U.S.A., many overseas Sikh leaders are reported to believe he was deliberately used by the Indian government to hinder their pro-Khalistan activities.

<sup>40</sup> Cohen, “The Military,” p. 135; Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, pp. 84–87, 89, 126–27.



Sikh ex-servicemen openly joined the militants,<sup>41</sup> the central government — and Indian military commanders — had to wonder how many present at Longowal's Golden Temple gathering were covertly sympathetic to Bhindranwale and, if so, were prepared to influence their relatives in the armed forces against the policies of the national political leadership.

Many believed that such influence had indeed taken place when over two thousand Sikh Indian Army personnel deserted and or mutinied upon learning of Operation Blue Star. On 7 June 1984, six hundred soldiers of the Sikh Regiment's 9th Battalion broke into the regimental armoury and drove through the Punjabi cantonment town of Ganganagar shouting "long live Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale" and firing indiscriminately. One policeman was killed, another wounded. While some fled into nearby Pakistan, the rest were apprehended by the Rajputana Rifles before they could proceed to Delhi as planned. Two days later, having learnt of the 9th Battalion mutiny from BBC radio reports, almost fifteen hundred soldiers of the Sikh Regimental Centre in Ramgarh (Bihar) attacked the armoury, killing their commanding officer, Brig. S. C. Puri, and wounding two other senior officers when the three approached. They then commandeered civilian vehicles and set off for Amritsar, 840 miles distant. After dividing in two just before Benares to avoid a rumoured roadblock, one half was engaged by army artillery at Shakteshgarh railway station and the remnants rounded up by the 21st Mechanized Infantry Brigade. The other half, confronted by artillery and troops of the 20th Infantry Brigade, stopped to fight and thirty-five were killed. Six more minor infractions of discipline are believed to have occurred, including one in another Sikh Regiment battalion stationed in J&K, a second by Sikhs serving in the Punjab Regiment in Pune, and a third by Sikhs deployed in units guarding Bombay's Santa Cruz airport.<sup>42</sup>

How to punish the post-Operation Blue Star disciplinary violations initially vexed the authorities. Whereas the Defence Ministry first appeared to soft-pedal the incidents, describing the men as "misguided . . . We understand the feelings of the Sikh jawans,"<sup>43</sup> General Officer Commanding Southern Command (Sikh) Lt. Gen. T. S. Oberoi declared that the "deserters who have surrendered will be court-martialled and punished."<sup>44</sup> In an unprecedented all-India broadcast one month later, Indian Army Chief General A. S. Vaidya made the first public acknowledgement that the disciplinary violations included mutinies (open revolt

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<sup>41</sup> Tully and Jacob describe how "People living in the bazaars surrounding the [Golden] temple . . . had been told that some of the ex-servicemen were giving weapons training to young Sikhs." See Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, p. 103.

<sup>42</sup> See Cohen, "The Military," p. 135; Nayar and Singh, *Tragedy*, pp. 107–108; and Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, pp. 194–97.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 198–99.

against superiors' orders) rather than desertions (leaving their posts), and laid out the authorities' final position: "I would like to give an assurance that those who acted in a mutinous manner will be dealt with severely under the law as enacted for the army, so that those who remain with us in the army and have the honour of bearing arms for the country, would [sic] be a proud and disciplined body of soldiers."<sup>45</sup>

In a September 1985 interview (the now retired) Vaidya explained his reasons for punishing the mutineers: "I do not see any difference in taking up arms against a foreign enemy or an enemy from within. To my mind, one who takes up arms against his own Constitution and legally-constituted government is enemy enough, deserving the most ruthless punishment."<sup>46</sup>

Yet Sikh and non-Sikh opinion of the post-Operation Blue Star disciplinary violations remained divided. A group of five retired Sikh lieutenant generals protested to President Zail Singh that the mutineers were a special case insofar that as Sikhs, these soldiers had sworn their allegiance on the *Guru Granth Sahib* (Sikh holy book — all Indian army regiments induct their personnel with a religious as well as civil oath),<sup>47</sup> and had been let down by military superiors who had kept them uninformed of the situation leading up to and including Operation Blue Star.<sup>48</sup> Although the president reportedly sympathized with their demand that the mutineers be reinstated in their units, he declared himself lacking the power to do so.<sup>49</sup> Subsequent government statements about the mutineers' attempts to "spread disaffection in the ranks of the armed forces" were seen as counterattacks against those who had sympathized with the breakdown of discipline and who were now protesting about the "inhuman treatment" of the mutineers at the hands of the army.<sup>50</sup>

#### OFFICERS' OPINIONS OF THE POST-OPERATION BLUE STAR VIOLATIONS

Did the post-Operation Blue Star violations signal the end of treating Sikh armed forces' personnel as equals? See table 4: "Did the isolated outbreaks of troop mutinies following Operation Blue Star affect ethnic relations within the military?" (Note the reduced sample group in table 4 of 57 non-Sikh and 12 Sikh officers.)

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>46</sup> M. Rahman, "A. S. Vaidya — The Killing of a General," *India Today*, 31 August 1986, p. 21.

<sup>47</sup> Cohen, "The Military," p. 135.

<sup>48</sup> These officers were Lt. Gens. M. S. Wadalia, Harbaksh Singh, J. S. Dhillon, J. S. Aurora and Sartaj Singh. See Nayar and Singh, *Tragedy*, Annexure F, pp. 160–63.

<sup>49</sup> Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, pp. 199–200.

<sup>50</sup> See Press Trust of India, "Forces Being Denigrated" and "Leave the Army Alone," editorial, *The Times of India* (Bombay), 28 November 1984, as used in Cohen, "The Military," p. 137; and Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, pp. 199–200.

*Sikh and Non-Sikh Officers' Opinions of Operation Blue Star*

While not one Sikh officer feels intramilitary relations were “Yes, Positively” affected by the post–Operation Blue Star violations, a small minority (12 percent) of non-Sikh officers do. There now exists a “better understanding and [a] greater responsibility on [sic] leadership,” writes non-Sikh Brigadier 38. Non-Sikh Vice Admiral 2 agrees: “Operation Blue Star has bettered Sikh/others relations because now there is more attention paid to understanding each other.” Although “ethnic relations were affected, adds non-Sikh Brigadier 46, “I think over a period sanity has been restored, in the army at least, and things have improved. The change has promoted better efforts at understanding different groups.”

This optimism is not shared by the 19 percent of non-Sikh officers who perceive ethnic relations to have “Negatively” changed since Operation Blue Star. “It is said that Operation Blue Star and its aftereffect have not affected the standing of Sikhs in the military,” says non-Sikh Air Marshal 5, “but it is only natural that it must have.” Non-Sikh Brigadier 69, citing the examples of “[Major General] Bhullar who joined the Khalistan movement and went to the West on fund-raising missions for this cause . . . [and] a Sikh General [Shahbeg Singh] who ended up being killed in the Golden Temple during Operation Blue Star,” writes how “after Operation Blue Star, Sikhs [sic] officers may well be undependable. . . . It has shaken my confidence in Sikh troops, *maybe unjustifiably*” (my italics). Non-Sikh Air Chief Marshal 12 does not doubt that the mutinies have “affected their [Sikh’s] standing in the military, but we don’t make it obvious.”

Fully 42 percent, or an equal majority of those Sikh officers offering an opinion, agree that the post–Operation Blue Star violations have “negatively” affected intramilitary ethnic relations. “Yes, of course they did and have,” writes Sikh Lieutenant General 56; “there is increased prejudice, though not overtly very visible.” Yet “closing one’s eyes to such

TABLE 4  
DID THE ISOLATED OUTBREAKS OF TROOP MUTINIES FOLLOWING  
OPERATION BLUE STAR AFFECT ETHNIC RELATIONS WITHIN THE MILITARY?

Officers	All	Non-Sikh	Sikh
	Percent (No.)		
Yes, Positively	10% (7)	12% (7)	0% (0)
No Change	46% (32)	47% (27)	42% (5)
Yes, Negatively	23% (16)	19% (11)	42% (5)
No Answer	20% (14)	21% (12)	17% (2)
Total	99% (69)	99% (57)	101% (12)

problems never solves them,” argues Sikh Major General 96, adding that “the army higher leadership is most to blame.” Sikh Air Marshal 3 describes how

After Operation Blue Star there were stories of all Sikh soldiers being under suspicion, of the disarming of certain units, the pairing of certain Sikh units with other soldiers. These have faded away . . . gone underground. There should have been a more humanitarian attitude taken towards Sikh deserters . . . still languishing in Jodhpur jails [see also below]. . . . It was not a wise thing to award medals [to military personnel] for Operation Blue Star.

The post–Operation Blue Star mutinies’ negative effect on ethnic relations is inescapable, concludes Sikh Major General 86; “the desertion of Sikh troops has no precedence and no example of similar happenings. It was unfortunate for Sikhs and the Indian Army and the country.”

Nonetheless, an equal majority of Sikh (42 percent) and an outright majority of non-Sikh (47 percent) officers giving an opinion feel there has been “No Change” in the armed forces’ ethnic relations since the post–Operation Blue Star violations. (Although “No Change” could be understood as “things are as bad as ever,” the comments below reveal this choice to mean “things are as good as ever.”) Sikh Group Captain 77 believes the post–Operation Blue Star mutinies resulted from a “leadership failure in those units” only. Thus, continues non-Sikh Major General 36, there has been “no effect on ethnic relations at all. Isolated outbreaks are due to the failure of senior leadership and *Granthis* ([Sikh] religious teachers). Officers too were overconfident that nothing will happen. . . . [They were] unable to appreciate the religious sentiments and the measures to prevent it.”

Non-Sikh Brigadier 37 adds how “the mutinies/desertions occurred where Akali agents had succeeded in infiltrating in the guise of religious teachers and had poisoned troops’ minds. The unit commanders also failed to keep themselves posted of what was happening in the unit. There has been hardly any deterioration in [the] mutual relations of ethnic groups.”

“The role of Sikhs in the military is not compromised,” continues non-Sikh Lieutenant General 16, as “only those Sikh soldiers away from Amritsar and susceptible to rumours deserted . . . [It was] the fault of their officers and the ethnic relations are intact,” concludes Sikh Major General 74, adding that “religion is a personal matter in the military and is respected.”

Despite this respect for personal religious beliefs, tables 1–4 show non-Sikh and Sikh officers to be divided on every question pertaining to Operation Blue Star. On tables 1–2 Sikh officers are revealed as much more ready than their non-Sikh comrades to blame the Central Government and not foreign support for creating the situation which made the

army's intervention in Punjab a real possibility. Table 3 shows Sikh officers almost unanimously *unconvinced* of Operation Blue Star's necessity while a large majority of non-Sikh officers support the action. And table 4 sees Sikh officers much more inclined than their non-Sikh counterparts to perceive a decline in the military's ethnic relations since the mutinies after Operation Blue Star. Do the sharp differences of non-Sikh and Sikh officers' views on the aftereffects of Operation Blue Star spell the end of the Indian Army's century-old practice of disproportionately recruiting personnel from specific communities of the north and northwest, especially Sikhs from Punjab?

#### CONCLUSION

Several military factors support ending the Indian Army's disproportionate recruitment and the posting together of men from selected communities. One fear is that the army's fighting effectiveness will be endangered by the tendency of disaffected personnel closely related by ethnicity, religion and/or region to act in a unified manner. Stephen Cohen describes the evidence concerning Sikhs:

Given the evidence of the mutinies . . . the temporary alienation of retired Sikh officers, and the close links between Sikhs in and out of the military, one can assume that no Sikh unit was fully trusted, especially in a situation which involved the military itself. . . . The overall integrity of the Indian armed forces, especially the army, may have been badly, if temporarily, weakened. If Sikhs comprise about 12 percent of the army, then the effective fighting strength of the army was probably reduced by at least that figure (more, if non-Sikh units must be deployed so as to contain another mutiny).<sup>51</sup>

Even today, adds non-Sikh Major General 20, "some of the Sikh units [which] actually mutinied . . . are still not pacified. The loyalty of nearly 25 percent of our troops is in doubt." For non-Sikh Lieutenant General 87, the post-Operation Blue Star violations show that "organisational reforms to do away with 'one class' units are long overdue."

The Indian Army's ever-increasing "aid-to-the-civil authority" duties also suggest ending the recruitment and posting together of any specific community in numbers disproportionate to their share of the national population. The post-Operation Blue Star mutinies demonstrated that armed forces' personnel, in this case Sikhs, may react in an undisciplined manner if they perceive their own community to be unjustly targeted and/or treated by the military. Although there exists a multitude of paramilitary organizations created "to serve as a buffer between the

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<sup>51</sup> Cohen, "The Military," p. 136.

regular armed forces and the rough and tumble of domestic disorder,”<sup>52</sup> the centre has increasingly called on the army to enforce internal law and order: for instance, from just under 500 occasions between 1951 and 1970 to 64 times in the 18 months from June 1979 to December 1980.<sup>53</sup> If this trend continues, how much longer will the Indian Army be able to recruit and post together men from specific communities while remaining confident that such personnel can be trusted to carry out their secondary duty of aid-to-the-civil authorities? “Mixed units may not be the only answer,” argues non-Sikh Brigadier 46, “but it is in the interest of politicians, so they will ensure this is done.”

Since the Indian Army, writes non-Sikh Lieutenant General 19, “is, after all, not separate from society, post-Operation Blue Star events in the wider civil arena can also be used as an argument to end any over-dependence on specific . . . [communities], and Sikhs in particular.” On 31 October 1984 Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by two of her Sikh guards in revenge for Operation Blue Star. In the following riots, thousands of Sikh civilians were killed (reportedly with the connivance of local Congress[I] representatives).<sup>54</sup> On 10 August 1986 (retired) General Vaidya was gunned down by the Khalistan Commando Force for his role in Operation Blue Star and the punishment of Sikh mutineers.<sup>55</sup> Since then, despite numerous further attempts at negotiated peace, the polarization of opinion on Punjab’s problems has continued, as well as killings by both pro-Khalistan militants and government security forces.<sup>56</sup> “There is a certain atmosphere . . . [in society],” adds

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123. In 1979, paramilitary forces raised to keep law and order (some of which are sometimes known as parapolice forces) included the Central Reserve Police, Railway Protection Force, State Armed Police, Home Guards, Village Guards (in Nagaland), Volunteer Force (in Manipur), Central Industrial Security Force, and Defence Security Force. In addition, the Border Security Force, Indo-Tibetan Border Police, Uttar Pradesh Special Police Force, Assam Rifles and Coast Guard exist to guard the national border in peacetime and assist the military in wartime. There are also two paramilitary organizations — the Border Roads Organisation and the Land Army Scheme (in Karnataka) — assigned to developmental activities. Although merging several of the above organizations into a more coherent paramilitary organization has been discussed, so has creating yet another paramilitary force to work with the military in specific situations such as Punjab and Sri Lanka. See Lt. Gen. M. L. Chibber, *USI Papers Number Four Para Military Forces* (New Delhi: United Service Institution of India, 1979), pp. 5, 22–36; and Shekar Gupta, “Paramilitary Forces — The Tired Trouble Shooters,” *India Today*, 15 February 1988, pp. 82–84.

<sup>53</sup> See Lt. Gen. S. K. Sinha, *Of Matters Military* (New Delhi: Vision Books, 1980), p. 37, as used in Cohen, “The Military,” pp. 124–27.

<sup>54</sup> Estimates of the casualties sustained during 1984’s anti-Sikh riots vary widely. The central government recognizes 2,717 deaths (almost all Sikhs), all but 567 occurring in Delhi. See Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, pp. 1–3, 5–9. Sikh Air Marshal 3 says ten to twenty thousand Sikhs were killed in Delhi alone.

<sup>55</sup> Rahman, “A. S. Vaidya,” pp. 16–21.

<sup>56</sup> For a summary of developments in Punjab from 1984 to 1991, see Gurharpal Singh, “The Punjab Problem in the 1990s: A Post-1984 Assessment,” *The Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* (London), vol. 29 (July 1991), pp. 175–91.

Sikh Air Marshal 3, "thick enough to cut with a knife." "If the [negative] attitude of the people continues as it is towards Sikhs," adds Sikh Brigadier 39, "the situation can get bad."

In their defence, the pro-Sikh and specific community recruitment lobbies make several telling points. As shown by the haphazard nature of the post-Operation Blue Star violations of discipline, the mutinous Sikh military personnel appear to have had no premeditated plan of action in the eventuality of army action in Punjab. Nor did the Court of Inquiry of the Sikh Regimental Centre find any evidence of systematic attempts to influence the loyalty of Sikh military personnel by ex-army relatives or foreign powers.<sup>57</sup> "In the ultimate analysis," argues non-Sikh Brigadier 90, "the [mutinous] actions of certain individuals turned out to be an emotional reaction rather than a deliberate premeditated action."

Like many of the officers represented in table 4 above, the Sikh Regimental Centre inquiry blamed the post-Operation Blue Star violations on the centre's junior and senior officers' ignorance of the need to keep their men informed of the specific motives, objectives and/or results of Operation Blue Star. "As far as the mutiny goes," adds Lieutenant General S. K. Sinha, "I will squarely blame the officer corps, because they apparently did not know what their men were thinking. . . . Officers must know their men better than their mothers. In this case they obviously did not."<sup>58</sup> This failure of leadership left inexperienced soldiers — 1,050 of the Sikh Regimental Centre's 1,461 mutineers were raw recruits, untrained and with no experience of Indian Army *izzat* (honour)<sup>59</sup> — posted together and vulnerable to the mutinous exhortations of their more fervently religious comrades. Even so, the inquiry found many of these men had been forced to desert at gun-point.

Where Sikh soldiers were experienced and well led, there were no violations of discipline. Although unhappy with the short period of preparation allowed him, 9th Division CO Maj. Gen. Kuldip Singh Brar found time to visit his non-Sikh and Sikh troops, explain the rationale behind the forthcoming Operation Blue Star, and (without precedent) offer them the chance to refuse to participate with no repercussions. Not

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<sup>57</sup> The findings of the Court of Inquiry of the Sikh Regimental Centre indiscipline are taken from Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, pp. 194–97.

<sup>58</sup> From "a newspaper interview" as used in Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, p. 198.

<sup>59</sup> Descriptions of the *izzat* which had bonded British and now Indian officers and men to each other and their regiment may be found in F. Ingall, *The Last of the Bengal Lancers* (London: Leo Cooper, 1988); Humphrey Evans, *Thimayya of India: A Soldier's Life* (First Indian edition Dehra Dun: Natraj Publishers, 1988); John Masters, *Bugles and a Tiger* (London: Michael Joseph, 1956), and *The Road Past Mandalay* (London: Michael Joseph, 1961); Lt. Gen. S. P. P. Thorat, *From Reveille to Retreat* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1986); C. C. Trench, *The Frontier Scouts* (1985; rpt. Oxford University Press, 1986); and F. Yeats-Brown, *Bengal Lancer* (1930; rpt. London: Anthony Mott Limited, 1984).

one took up this offer and they fought under Brar in the assault on the Golden Temple complex with perfect discipline.<sup>60</sup>

Even more importantly, the loyalty of Sikh commissioned officers remained untarnished both during and after Operation Blue Star. While non-Sikh Lt.-Gen. (later General) K. Sundarji was in charge of the army in Punjab, his Sikh chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Ranjit Singh Dayal, planned Operation Blue Star, Sikh Maj. Gen. Kuldip Singh Brar commanded the 9th Division's liberation of the Golden Temple and hostel complex, and Sikh Maj. Gen. Gurdial Singh led the army operation against pro-Bhindranwale militants encountered in Patiala's *Gurudwara Dukhniwaran*.<sup>61</sup> Non-Sikh Vice Admiral 2 also recalls how "Lieut.-General Oberoi, a Sikh, personally rushed from Delhi to help apprehend mutinous Sikh soldiers."

Thus, the sharp differences between Sikh and non-Sikh officers over the responsibility for, and necessity of, army action in Punjab and the disciplinary violations which followed as shown in tables 1–4 were not reflected in the behaviour of serving Sikh personnel in the aftermath of Operation Blue Star. Although most Sikh armed forces' personnel must have been deeply upset with Operation Blue Star, they did not react as a self-interested corporate group or clique. Indeed, that not one of the mutineers came from among the Mazhabis of the Sikh Light Infantry suggests that Sikhs remain more divided by caste than united by ethnicity, religion and region.<sup>62</sup> In the end, only 3 percent of the Indian Army's Sikh soldiers<sup>63</sup> and not one Sikh commissioned officer joined in the post-Operation Blue Star violations.

The loyalty of the vast majority of Sikh soldiers and all Sikh officers during the testing days of Operation Blue Star has allowed the Indian Army to continue recruiting personnel from specific communities while making efforts to better ethnic relations. Remember, almost equal majorities of non-Sikh (47 percent) and Sikh (42 percent) officers offering an opinion in table 4 say the post-Operation Blue Star violations had "No Change" on what were good intramilitary ethnic relations. "Efforts have since been made to understand different groups and improve the leadership in units," reports non-Sikh Brigadier 45. Non-Sikh Brigadier 76 describes how "a central cell has since been created in the army where

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<sup>60</sup> See Gupta, "Crackdown in Punjab Operation Bluestar [sic]," *India Today*, p. 17; Nayar and Singh, *Tragedy*, p. 94; and Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, pp. 155–56, 161.

<sup>61</sup> Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, pp. 147, 152, 156–59.

<sup>62</sup> Pradeep P. Barua, "Ethnic Conflict in the Military of Developing Nations: A Comparative Analysis of India and Nigeria," in *Armed Forces & Society* (New Jersey), vol. 19, no. 1 (Fall 1992), p. 132.

<sup>63</sup> Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, p. 197.



courses are run on national integration with special emphasis on religious tolerance." A "better understanding has to result," concludes non-Sikh Brigadier 61, "but will take time. Therefore it is important [the] Punjab problem is solved at the earliest."

While lasting peace has yet to come to Punjab, the central government has learned some lessons from Operation Blue Star. In an attempt to assuage Sikh feelings, 900 of the 2,606 military mutineers were rehabilitated by August 1985 as part of the Rajiv-Longowal Accord signed one month previously.<sup>64</sup> In a move sure to be welcomed by many of the "All" "Yes" officers represented in table 3, the authorities have also placed a greater reliance on swift police responses to Sikh separatism. When two hundred Sikh militants took refuge in a fortified Golden Temple complex (from where they gunned down DIG S. S. Virk) in 1988, they were forced to surrender in a police-led operation (involving the National Security Guard) open to the media and resulting in the comparatively low casualty rate of three security forces' personnel and thirty militants killed.<sup>65</sup> Most recently, the authorities used armed police to surround the Golden Temple complex and evict the approximately three hundred Sikhs inside protesting the October 1992 execution of General Vaidya's killers.<sup>66</sup> Finally, although the centre has found it necessary to redeploy Indian Army units in Punjab since Operation Blue Star — during the abortive June 1991 elections and the February 1992 elections — there have been no reported instances of military indiscipline.<sup>67</sup>

*London School of Economics, U.K., March 1994*

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<sup>64</sup> Singh, "The Punjab Problem," pp. 176–78.

<sup>65</sup> Mark Tully, *No Full Stops in India* (London: Viking, 1991), pp. 153–80.

<sup>66</sup> "Sikhs defy police to mourn killers," *Independent* (London), 19 October 1992.

<sup>67</sup> See Singh, "The Punjab Problem," pp. 176, 179, 185; and Gurharpal Singh, "Punjab — Recent Developments," a seminar given to the University of London School of Oriental and African Studies Centre of South Asian Studies on 4 March 1993.