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N. 6  
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Fascicolo 24. Novembre 2025  
**Storia Militare Contemporanea (6)**



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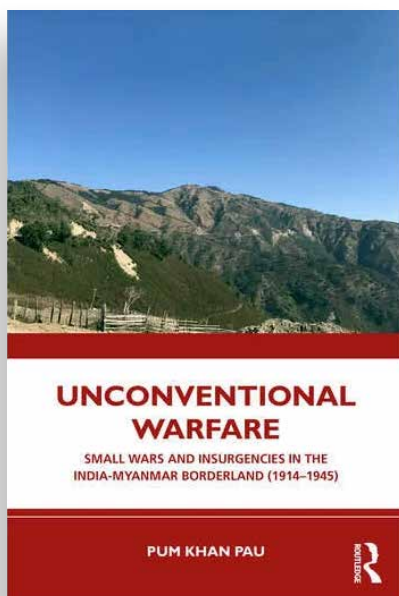


Estandart Reyau d'a Cheneralísma, prencipal bandera carlista d'a primera guerra bordada por María Francisca de Braganza em 1833 Royal Standard of the General in Chief, main Carlist flag of the First War embroidered by Maria Francisca de Braganza in 1833). Wikimedia Commons

PUM KHAN PAU,

***Unconventional Warfare:  
Small Wars and Insurgencies in  
the India-Myanmar Borderland (1914-1945)***

Oxon/New York: Routledge, 2025, xiii + 188 pp., ₹1295, ISBN: 978-1-041-08735-9.



**U***nconventional Warfare* delineates the evolution of tribal warfare in the Zo community with special focus on the First and the Second World Wars. Pum Khan Pau prefers using the generic term ‘Zo’ to refer to the ethnic communities INHABITING the India-Myanmar borderland who otherwise have been mentioned as Kuki, Chin, or Lushai in the colonial archival documents. Having already produced a monograph *Indo-Burma Frontier and the Making of the Chin Hills: Empire and Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2020), Pau is qualified enough to undertake the task of exploring the gamut of colonial encounters with the Zo community during the era of total war. The book is primarily written

from the perspective of the local inhabitants – though it is not a first of its kind. Pau prescribes his readers to read the book under review in conjunction with his earlier monograph where he had pushed the idea that dividing the Zo community into multiple administrative units by the British was a major blunder. In this present monograph, he inquires concepts like feuding, inter-clan or inter-village war, small war, insurgency, and colonial counterinsurgency. Subsequently, he relates these concepts with the transformation of Zo tribal warfare – ranging from raiding and headhunting to wars of resistance – during the two World Wars.

The focus of the work is to highlight the skill of the indigenous Zo community in fighting guerrilla warfare along the impenetrable jungle-clad mountainous India-Burma frontier. The author demonstrates how prior to the British colonial invasion, the village – the basic unit of the Zo society – had been under various chieftainships. For each chieftainship the notions of space and territoriality were different. War was a primordial feature of this society. Therefore, if a chief's power was threatened, raiding, headhunting, or even slave-hunting could take the shape of an inter-village, inter-tribal, or even an inter-communal war.

Once the region got integrated with the British Empire, the nature of tribal warfare changed into what Pau calls 'petty warfare'. Petty warfare involved attacking larger military units where the indigenous communities avoided collision and used guerrilla tactics. The author investigates how the location of the villages of the Zo community, the weapons they use, and their strong espionage network define the Zo warfare system. At the very outset, Pau establishes that warfare is an integral part of the Zo society, and consequently, every aspect of the society too is militaristically oriented.

To establish the book's central argument that the Zo supported the British during the Second World War because of their inherent political motivation, Pau forwards several sub-arguments spanning over multiple decades. The book shows that amidst another ongoing world war, tribal warfare along the India-Burma frontier went about a paradigm shift. During the First World War (1914-1918), Manipur, Kachin Hills, and Chin Hills saw the local populations rising in armed conflict against the British. Focusing on the less explored Haka Rebellion of the Chin Hills, Pau questions the simplistic narrative of dividing the population of the Chin Hills into binary groups of rebels and loyalists. By delving into the history of the *ukpi* system of chieftainship, he shows that the loyal people who joined the British labour corps did so under duress since their supralocal chieftainship,



the *ukpi*, was a British collaborator and wanted to honour the vow made before the coloniser. During the nineteenth century, the British had raised militias and levies with the locals to aid the British military units. But then those units were turned into military police battalions. Pau argues that this had not only discontented the local fighters aiding the colonisers but also changed the fighting ability of the inexperienced, untrained military police battalions such as the Assam Rifles who conducted 'savage warfare' against the local population. This point regarding British counterinsurgency policy, interestingly, is not far from the cases made by several European military personnel or scholars like Colonel (later Major-General) Charles E. Callwell or Major-General George Younghusband. Thus, taking advantage of scanty British military presence along the India-Burma frontier during the First World War, sometimes under their chiefs' leadership and sometimes spontaneously, the politically conscious Haka populace challenged the British rule in the Chin Hills. Through an intense research based on colonial archival documents and local oral narratives, Pau shows British military deployments to be a major reason why the otherwise fragmented Zo rose in a rebellion to reclaim their freedom in the hills. A point of criticism, however, may be directed towards the third chapter dealing with the Haka Rebellion. It lacks a much-needed thorough discussion on the ensuing military operations.

Skipping the interwar period, the monograph takes a leap and situates the narrative at the threshold of the Imperial Japanese Army's (IJA) invasion of Burma and thereby, the North-East India, during the Second World War (1939-1945). This gap appears to be rather glaring before the reader. But the author makes it up with the next section. The innovative chapter (Chapter 4) on propaganda establishes that because of superior British propaganda highlighting Japanese oppression, the Japanese could never win the hearts and minds of the local populace, especially those from the Chin Hills. The locals were caught in two minds – whether to support the Japanese against the British and bring forth their independence or to support the British as the Japanese would be just another new oppressor. The Manipuris aided the Japanese but those living in the Lushai Hills and Chin Hills supported the British to defeat the IJA and Indian National Army (INA).

Pushing his primary argument through this sub-argument, Pau argues that this support was conditional and the collaborators hoped that they would be rewarded for their service. They expected the colonisers would give them some form of autonomy after the war. Much to their chagrin, that did not happen which,

according to Pau, remains a major reason behind the ongoing insurgencies along the India-Myanmar border in the post-colonial times. The author analyses the role of the Zo community in fighting the jungle war along the India-Burma frontier. He emphasises that their age-old skill in guerrilla warfare helped the British to defeat the IJA. He also explores how the locals helped in the construction of the Tedim Road, one of the major links between Burma and India. It later became a significant theatre of conflict. The writer seamlessly blends his earlier allusion to the Zo espionage network with the Zos' subsequent role during the Second World War as British spies in the garb of Japanese collaborators. He argues that if not for their secret information, precision airstrikes on the Japanese and eventually a British victory would not have had been possible. Although the book favours the indigenous Zo perspective, the author refers to several British officers' accounts to provide a balanced narrative in the chapters (4-7) dealing with this period. While there remains room for further exploration of the indigenous voices through memories, oral accounts, and written records, the balanced perspective and multi-archival research enrich the overall argument of the monograph.

The author assiduously studies the features of warfare and society of the Zo community to help us better understand the history of one of the most fascinating yet neglected borderlands – the India-Myanmar borderland. Though there are significant works on this region by the likes of James Scott, Jangkhomang Guite, etc., this is the first book that focuses essentially on the two world wars. His constant contextually relevant comparisons between the India-Burma frontier and other societies of the world across time, provide the reader with a global perspective. Including the stories of Rani Gaidinlui and Ursala Graham Bower in the narrative and highlighting Bower's role in the fight against the IJA increase the horizon of this work. Although an empirically rich text, the chapters sometimes rely too heavily on repetitive secondary literature, or a primary source is used several times. As the earlier versions of most of the chapters were published previously, further editing was required to make the pieces more suitable for the monograph. Unnecessary repetitions of entire passages should have been avoided. Carelessly, in one instance, Callwell's threefold division of small wars has been wrongly attributed to Robert M. Cassidy (p. 4). However, barring these minor flaws, this well researched work remains an indispensable and timely study on the contested India-Myanmar borderland and the Zo community for students and researchers alike.

SOHINI MITRA





William Balfour Ker (1877-1918), *Knights of Columbus*, 1917 / Poster showing a priest looking heavenward and raising a crucifix, blessing kneeling soldiers. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA. Reproduction Number: LC-USZC4-10131  
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