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Chinese labourers arriving in Northern France to construct the railway line in Blangy-sous-Poix and Aumale. Pas-de-Calais, Northern France, May 16, 1918.

A WAR THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

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The history of World War I has not been of much interest to developing world, the Second World War being more of a reference point if at all. But the truth is that thousands of Indians and Africans from the colonized world died with their European leaders in that war. It was a war that required the most fearless kind of ground resistance imaginable, a war where few would ever come out alive. It was a war that dramatically changed the relationship between the colonizers and the colonies.

Alliance Française's endeavour to showcase this unique participation through rare photographs of the troops and an international conference on the subject, has been one of its kind.

Dr Imtiaz Ahmed, Professor of International Relations, DU, in his paper, discussed the way Tagore, Gandhi, MN Roy and others confronted the subject and the way it paved for the anti-colonial resistance in India. Tagore, for instance, saw the War as an outcome of the nationalistic zeal then prevailing in the West and Japan. He referred to the 'menace of nationalism' and urged Indians not to fall prey to it, advocating 'an alliance of humans from all social categories both within and beyond territorial boundaries' that would make the world a better place. For Gandhi, according to Professor Ahmed, the War made him realise the 'confluence of means and end and the justification for non-violence' which would ultimately free the disempowered from oppression and domination. In contrast, for Manabendra Nath Roy, the War was an opportunity to wage war against the British and for this he was ready to form alliances with anti-British forces.

Dr Gilbert Meynier, who has taught in France and Algeria, talked about the role of Algeria in the War and how the participation of Algerian troops paved the way for anti-colonial movements in later times. Algeria, a French colony, was the largest provider of men and material to the War. As many as 175,000 men were drafted into the french army, half of them volunteers, the other half as conscripts. Ironically, army rule came to be perceived as less discriminatory than colonial rule. Around 120,000 workers found employment in national defense factories. They were badly treated but they became familiar with working class culture and rubbed shoulders with trade unionists.

According to Meyneir, it made them more conscious of their deprivations and the War added one more chapter of broken promises and other frustrations inherent in colonial rule.