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# Imperial Legacies and Modern Day Mercenaries

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3-4 minutes

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As if borrowing from Faulkner, Kesang Tseten's *Who Will Be a Gurkha* (2012) argues, "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

A beautiful and emotional film, *Who Will Be a Gurkha*, tells the story of 8,000 young Nepalis that are competing for the annual 176 slots in the Gurkha regiments of the British Army, an imperial practice stretching back to the early nineteenth century. Tseten's use of modern footage, interspersed with archival images, brings to the fore how little has changed in the decades of recruitment: British officers measure head circumferences and give careful instructions on how to do a pull-up.

Hundreds of thousands of Nepalis served in the British Imperial Army, and while these numbers have slowed to a trickle, the colonial legacy remains. White British officers, speaking surprisingly good Nepali, work with a group of former Gurkhas to test the mettle of these young men. This documentary, however, made in the era of reality TV, shows just how perverse the process has become. Recruits, who have spent years training and have often paid thousands of dollars to training facilities, are narrowed down through rounds of physical challenges and interviews. The

losers are dramatically sent off, with a pat on their back, told to keep their chins up. The film is never overtly humorous but drips with irony as condescending officers lecture recruits on their pull-up form while competing for spots in one of the world's most modern militaries.

While less experimental than some of Tseten's other riveting films, which the viewer should also seek out, this ethnographic critique of Gurkha recruitment opens up new avenues for understanding how Nepal, a country never formally colonized, still needs to be understood through the lens of ongoing postcolonial power systems. The eager recruits demonstrate just how the heroic language of martial races and the brave Gurkha has pressured them to take part in this unwinnable game that only further allows for their own oppression.

At the end of the film, emotions peak as recruits are told that they have not been selected to join the Gurkha regimes (no one ever fails; they only "have not been selected"). Some are told to consider the Indian Army or the Singaporean Police, who have inherited the colonial legacy of Gurkha recruitment.

More, however, end up seeking work abroad using other, more dangerous routes that are typical of more neoliberal versions of imperialism, relying on brokers to negotiate contracts for them abroad. Tens of thousands of these young men ended up fighting not for the British, but for the American military in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, where U.S. forces were often times outnumbered by international private security contractors. This new form of American imperialism is, in many ways, even harsher than the paternalistic one we see in *Who Will Be a Gurkha*, since the United States does not provide citizenship or any of the

support that Gurkhas in British regiments receive. The viewer is left to contemplate the ways in which colonialism and empire take on their own culture forms that echo through the centuries, but have heartbreakingly real consequences today, in places as far from Britain as the bucolic mountains of Nepal.