Transcultural Encounters
between Germany and India
Kindred spirits in the nineteenth and
twentieth centuries

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Part IV
Nazi Germany and India
10 Indian political activities in Germany, 1914–1945

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This chapter focuses on Indian exiles in Germany in the first half of the twentieth century, an illuminating aspect of the international historical dimensions of South Asia. Berlin was the hub of many of these international connections and events, playing host to persons whose contacts and connections, engagements, politics and personal relationships ranged across the world at a time of tumultuous change and potential revolution. Communists like Mambendra Nath (MN) Roy, Virendranath Chattopadhyay (‘Chatto’) and Soumyendranath Tagore spent many formative years in Berlin, basing themselves in that city or continually returning to it. The future Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, regarded Berlin when he visited it in 1926 as the hub of all that was exciting in the political and intellectual life of Europe; he met many of his enduring political connections there.

Another side to this engagement with Germany has so far evaded serious study: some Indians were interested in the potential for fascism in general, and with its increasing successes with Nazism in particular, as a potential model for Indian politics. Their organisational networks and political contacts tended in the early years to be in the city of Munich. However, given that the cluster of ideas and influences that were available to intellectuals in the interwar period were not, at the outset, clearly separated into ideological camps, there is much ambiguous space that must also be accounted for.

Three essays in this volume examine respectively the engagement and involvement of Indians with German communism, with India’s role in Nazi racial theory and with Indian spirituality and occultism in the Nazi imaginary. A fourth surveys German activities in India from the unification of Germany to the end of the Second World War. This essay concentrates on the wider perspectives that underpin these engagements with and in Germany; it will speak to aspects of the aforementioned essays, but is in the nature of an overview, which necessitates brevity; it also focuses more on those aspects of Indian engagements with Germany that are less well-known. Larger theoretical reflections are deferred to other spaces, times and publications.
The ‘Hindu-German plot’, the First World War and after

Optimism that a strong Germany successfully challenging Britain in a war might lead to a weakening of Britain’s hold on India predated the outbreak of the Great War, and had of course been encouraged by German circles. Upon the outbreak of the war, a number of Indians went to Germany, notably Tarak Nath Das, the Bengali activist from the Swadeshi era (who had acquired US citizenship) and Bhashyam Seth Dutt (the younger brother of the Hindu missionary, Swami Vivekananda); they joined those who were already there (for instance Virendranath Chattopadhyay, who had been studying at Halle University), or those who had arrived in Germany from elsewhere in Europe (for instance Champa Prasad Pillai from Switzerland). Together, they formed the Indian Independence Committee (IIC) in Berlin. The Committee itself was the brainchild of the Nachrichtenstelle für den Orient and its director, the Orientalist Max Freiherr von Oppenheim, who tended to refer to the IIC as ‘Meine Insid’ (“my Indians”). The Indians on the Committee were expected to assist with propaganda material to induce desertions and surrenders among British Indian troops in Europe; they were expected to conduct propaganda among the Indian prisoners of war in German prison camps, inducing them to desert to the German side and volunteer for a military expedition to free India from foreign rule; and to assist in a move to bring Indian troops into India via Afghanistan, where a Turkish government would use the authority of the Sultan as Supreme Commander of the Faithful to incite at least the Indian Muslims to rebellion against the British.

The ‘plot’ was highlighted and sensationalised in the press during the famous San Francisco Conspiracy Case of 1917-1918, when the United States joined the war and proceeded to take action against Indians and their sympathisers operating from within the USA. Its military goals, which were very far from being realised, included using deserting British Indian troops to enter India and link up with internal rebellions (the largest attempt of which failed in 1915), although a government-in-exile was set up in Kabul by early 1916, with Maulvi Barkaulah, formerly Urdu lecturer at Tokyo University and latterly a member of the Ghadar in San Francisco, as Prime Minister, and Raja Mahendra Pratap, maverick traveller and activist for Indian independence, its President.11 Towards the end of the war, a group had moved with Viren Chattopadhyay to Sweden, where a strategic branch office of Indian nationalists had been set up, and from where Chatto and his colleagues had begun communicating with the Bolsheviks in the run-up to the October Revolution. Many of them moved back to Germany in the early years of the Weimar Republic.

The remnants of the networks of exiles who had gathered in Germany during the Great War continued to operate after the war, with a renewed political energy that came from the revolution in Russia and the anticipated western European, and in particular German, revolution, the success of which was considered essential to the defeat of capitalism worldwide.12 Members of the wartime Indian Independence Committee were joined by newcomers like M. N. Roy, who made his base for the early 1920s, and Hamburg port his preferred conduit for communication with India, or Soumanda Pratap Tagore, the poet Rabindranath’s nephew, and an unorthodox socialist who travelled in and out of Berlin until 1933. Their circle included students, apprentices working in German firms, a smattering of former prisoners of war, both military personnel and civilians who had stayed on in Germany, in some cases having married German women,13 and a stream of sailors who travelled in and out of Hamburg port, and became a conduit for the movement of arms and illegal literature in and out of India. One Surendra Bhadra Sen, a Bengali Jew, joined the Indian army in 1915, became a captain, and saw action in the First World War, and was later arrested and imprisoned for his activities. In 1921, he was sentenced to 12 years’ imprisonment for sedition, but was acquitted in 1924.14 Another Indian, K. B. Bose, was arrested in 1922 for sedition, and was sentenced to 10 years’ imprisonment.15 In 1923, he was released on condition that he leave the country.

Indian students, larcars, apprentices or travellers passing through Germany were sought out by the newly active communist groups in order to mobilise and politicise them. The presence and organised nature of the Indian exile networks did not go unnoticed by the imperial authorities. The new German regime had decided by and large to continue with its sympathetic treatment of anti-British exiles in Germany.16 The German diplomatic corps believed that the exiles had too much to tell about Germany during the war, and therefore should be continued to be hosted even if many of them were communists well to the left of the Weimar regime. On one occasion, when some British administrators thought they had pulled off a diplomatic triumph by persuading the Weimar regime to expel the remaining Indian exiles who were conducting their subversive activities in Berlin, they were rebuffed not only by German diplomatic circles, but by Charles Tegart, chief of the Berlin Police.17

Organising for politics

The Berlin-based Independence for India Committee was the recognised organisation of Indians in Germany during the Great War; it was an awkward conglomeration of persons of diverse political tendency who had been willing to work with the German state against the British Empire. After the war, the disintegration and splitting up of the India Committee was the logical outcome of a process that had begun long before. The split broadly took the lines of those who were
socialists or anarchists of some description, and those who were not. The latter group were less well-defined, and included the Switzerland-based Champakratan Pillai, who had been part of a 'Pro-India Committee' there before the war, and later became a member of Hugenberg's Nationalist Party in Germany.20

Virendranath Chattopadhyay had been part of the group that found its way to Stockholm in 1917, whence they petitioned socialists, and the Bolsheviks in Russia in particular, to take up the cause of Indian independence and of the emancipation of colonies in general.21 Returning to Berlin in the early 1920s, this group started to reorganise. By this time, as mentioned above, the Weimar Republic was under diplomatic pressure to stop sheltering the Kaiserreich's favoured subversives. M. N. Roy made Berlin his base in the early 1920s, and returned again to Berlin in the late 1920s, before returning to India to be promptly arrested. He and Chatto were on different sides of the German Communist Party's alignments: Roy was associated with the KPD (O) or the 'opposition' group, and Chatto, a close associate of Willy Minzenburg, was an important member of the KPD, a coordinator with Kote Hithe, the communist front organisation set up to provide legal and institutional assistance to leftists in trouble with the state, and the contact person for many people passing through Germany on their way to the Soviet Union.22

1920s Berlin was the hub of international subversive activities, where Egyptian and Indian organisations could coordinate their activities, assist each other in their anti-imperialist activities and collectively appeal to the principles of German sovereignty and international political asylum rights.23 Berlin also became a major centre for subversive publications, ranging from anarchist and communist to pan-Islamic.24 Specifically, in this environment, Indian organisations began to grow and internationalist networks began to form, with Berlin as the meeting point where networks that spanned the globe took shape. The Congress of Oppressed Peoples and Nationalities, held in Brussels in 1927, which brought the League Against Imperialism into being, was largely organised by Viren Chattopadhyay and Willy Minzenburg, most of the preparatory work being done from Berlin.25 The solidarityists made in Brussels and Berlin had a long afterlife into the 1950s, well after the internationalist moment that begat them had ceased to be, with important Brussels delegates becoming key leaders in their respective countries, and in the Afro-Asian and non-aligned movements of the 1950s and 1960s.26 Networks that had their roots in the United States before and during the First World War also re-emerged in Berlin: Agos Smedley, feminist radical and communist activist, and an unlikely disciple of Lala Lajpat Rai (the spokesman for Hindu nationalism) in his American exile, made her way to Berlin, where she started an uneasy and destructive relationship with Chatto and where she also met Jawaharlal Nehru, whom she introduced to Edgar Snow thus paving the way for a deeper Indian nationalist alliance with the Chinese communist movement.

The 'Indian Information Bureau' became the institutionalised face of the Indian left in Berlin. Run largely by A. C. N. Nambiar, brother-in-law of Viren Chattopadhyay, this was the only international organisation to receive an annual

subsidy from the Indian National Congress, and was, therefore, in no small measure, the official face of Indian anti-imperialism in Germany.27 It ran a student organisation, acting mostly as a front for political recruitment, in Germany. The 'Hindustan House' in Hallebn, bought by Chatto and used as a student mess, could in some ways be seen as being modelled on the 'India House' in London where Chatto had been in the 1910s, along with Viney Mittal. Suvankar, later spokesman for Hindu Vishva Kranti, and Har Dayal, briefly his colleague in the Independence for India Committee during the Great War. Students were given a space to live, a place to eat (Indian food being one of the attractions) and a space for discussions.28 What was then the Friedrich Wilhelm Universität in Berlin (now Humboldt Universität) had its stream of Indian students, the most politically notable among them being the educationalist and future President of India, Zakir Hussain, and the future socialist leader, Ram Manohar Lohia, both of whom were in Berlin during the Nazi years.29

The Indian Information Bureau was closely followed by a counter-organisation in Munich. In 1928, the 'Indische Ausschuss' of the Deutsche Akademie was founded; the parent organisation had been founded in 1925 and is the forerunner of today's Goethe Institut, which started off in a branch of the Deutsche Akademe; there really is no institutional 'Stunde Null' in German history.30 The co-founders of the 'Indische Ausschuss' were Dr Karl Hausshofer, a specialist in geopolitics and one of the popularisers of the theory of 'Lebensraum' so beloved of the National Socialists, and the Bengali nationalist, Tarak Nuth Das.31 Das had acquired his US citizenship as early as 1913, had been a member of the wartime Independence for India Committee in Germany and had spent a number of years in Fascist Italy before returning to Germany;32 his letters to Lala Lajpat Rai, organiser-in-chief of a 'Hindu' parochial tendency in the Indian National Congress, suggest that he was very early on a supporter of a völkisch view of national belonging.33 The Deutsche Akademie's India Institute awarded scholarships to about 100 Indian students between 1929 and 1938. From 1937 it was headed by the IIndologist and member of the SS, Professor Walther Wüst,34 displacing Dr Franz Thierfelder, who had switched his allegiance easily to the Nazis in 1933, signing his letters 'mit deutschem Grunt und Heil Hitler'. The Institute also became active in pro-German propaganda during the Nazi period, and was instrumental in starting Nazi cells in various firms in Calcutta, which were under German control. It also funded German Lektor, who taught German to Indian students desiring to come to Germany; one such person taught German at the Calcutta YMCA; and Horst Pohle, the Nazi agent who was the German Lektor at Calcutta University, was said to be very close to the Aya Samaj, whose members were singled out as desirable students for the Munich-based India Institute.35 Among the other Indians to be closely associated with the Institute were the educationist, pioneering sociologist, economist, historian and Swadeshi activist, Benny Kumar Sarkar, later a convinced supporter of National Socialism, and Ashok Bose, the nephew of the future collaborator with Nazism, Subhas Chandra Bose.36
The National Socialists and the Indians

Two books by Bengalis about Germany, published around 1933, provide two contrasting perspectives on the coming of Hitler to power, describing him as 'Vivekananda multiplified by Bismarck'. Soumyendranath Tagore, who spent the late 1920s up to 1933 moving in and out of Berlin, wrote on the brutality of the Nazi regime, and commented for the benefit of his Indian audience that Indians were too easily taken in by the Nazis' apparent respect for 'Aryan' culture and the Aryans race, to which Indians claimed to belong. They did not know, he wryly commented, that the Nazis believed Indians to be degenerate Aryans due to their many generations of miscegenation, and were therefore willing to leave Indians to their fate under British rule. In 1933, the Indian Information Bureau was - quite literally - broken up by the Nazis: its office at Friedrichstrasse 24 was smashed to pieces, documents and equipment were strewn on the ground. The Gestapo arrested A. C. N. Nambiar, who was, for good measure, also beaten up by the Hitler Jugend. He was then paradoxically released, following the intervention of Subhas Chandra Bose from Vienna, who was apparently able to call in favours from people who had contacts with the Nazis. The Nazis paid Nambiar compensation of 2,000 marks, and he agreed to complain not about the Gestapo but about the Hitler Jugend. He then went, with his lover and until then secretary of the Indian Information Bureau, Irv Geiseler, to Prague. He was in Prague in 1938 as a correspondent of Nehru's paper, the National Herald, started in that year, and Nehru himself came to Prague around the time of the Munich Pact at which France and Britain effectively handed Czechoslovakia to Hitler's Germany. Germany began to lose its leftist political activists to other countries: Soumyendranath Tagore, after having been imprisoned for his alleged role in trying to assassinate Adolf Hitler (he said later that he had had no such intention, but that it would have been worth a try had he been in a position to do so), found his way to Paris among German and other exiles from the Nazi regime, in the Anti-Fascist League of Henri Barbusse and the French Popular Front. Chatto made his way to the Soviet Union, where he vanished in one of Stalin's purges, c.1937. To the right of the political spectrum, Tarak Nath Das and Benoy Kumar Sarkar continued to be associated with an extended circle of Nazis in the new Reich, not least through the Deutsche Akademie. A stream of Indian students continued to pass through German universities and polytechnics throughout the 1930s, many of whom went to a greater or lesser extent impressed by the Nazis; the Indisches Ausschuss of the Deutsche Akademie continued to fund a number of these, and to provide back-up support. All of these students acquired a long-lasting fascination with German Nazism, though some at least returned to a home university with a tradition of support for National Socialism, such as Calcutta University, where Benoy Kumar Sarkar was the leading light of its 'German Club'. In Allgarh, Dr Spies [sic], the German professor, ran the Indian political activities in Germany
The Second World War, 'collaboration' and after

When the Nazi–Soviet Pact was signed in 1939, disrupting the last hope of 'collective security' against the Nazi threat, a general world war became more and more a matter of time. September 1939 was in many ways an anticlimax for Indians, who had watched international affairs with interest. Two years into the war, Subhas Chandra Bose escaped dramatically from India, turning up in Nazi Berlin, where his family and associates from his Vienna days joined him. This is the best-known episode in Indo-German relations, and we need not belabor the point here, except to say that Bose was a willing collaborator with the Nazis but was less than impressed by their tentative commitment to Indian independence. An unexpected returnee to Berlin was A. C. N. Namibiar, and when Bose left Germany to go to Japan, Namibiar stayed on as head of Bose’s Indian Legion; imprisoned after the war as a collaborator, Namibiar managed to slip into Switzerland, was given a passport by Jawaharlal Nehru’s Interim Government, much to the annoyance of the British, and duly made his way back to Germany in 1951 as the first Indian Ambassador to the Federal Republic.

Back in India, 1942 saw the old anti-communist hysteria of the British Government giving way to an uneasy alliance with the Communist Party of India after Germany attacked the USSR; but not all communists were legalised. Soumyendra Tagore was among the communists in India who never accepted the Nazi–Soviet Pact; he found himself interned nevertheless, as several fellow communists found themselves at large. Protesting against his long internment in 1944, he wrote an angry letter to the Government of Bengal. He had, he said, been a communist since 1925, had written his book on Hitlerism in 1934, the first book of its kind in India, and had been anti-fascist while the 'gangsters' Franco and Mussolini 'received holy uncum' from Chamberlain, Hoare 'and such other Imperialist Fascists of Great Britain':

I did not blossom forth as an anti-fascist only when it became quite safe to be an anti-fascist, but long ago when it was still not the fashion to be one. I did not become an anti-fascist because Churchill and Stalin embraced each other and the society ladies, including Mrs. Churchill, started selling red flags in streets and drawing rooms. I did not become an anti-fascist under the patronage of British Imperialist Fascists.

Conclusions

What, then, did those engagements with Germany and with the politics of Europe amount to? And to what extent and in what ways did these engagements connect with and feed into political organisation and events in India? The picture hitherto accepted on Indian politics at 'home' is something like this: the Indian National Congress was part of the 'progressive' Popular Front from 1935, and therefore the Indian national movement as a whole was broadly anti-fascist, its left wing leaning towards forms of socialism ranging from the radical to the moderate.

Some exceptions are made for ideologues of the so-called Hindu right wing, such as Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, whose Hindutva is said to be influenced by fascism, and M. S. Golwalkar, one of the major organisers of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, or the RSS, which has many similarities with the Hitler Jugend. Broadly, however, in the twenty years between the two world wars, there was a strong left-wing trend, an engagement with and adoption of communism. This applied to a large extent also to those who were not ideologically communists. And Indians in Germany were no exception to this pattern, largely being responsible for several of the ideological and leadership currents that made their way to India.

But ideological currents that appear clear in retrospect were not quite clear at the time. Agnes Smedley records this in her writings: she was led into an engagement with Indian independence struggles, and spent time in jail in the US as a consequence, through the influence of Lala Lajpat Rai, a charismatic figure who was, unlike her, never a socialist. She later started a PhD under the 'geopolitician' Karl Haushofer, upon his invitation, but did not complete it; and she asks herself why Haushofer would have been interested in recruiting someone so closely tied of his political ilk to study with him. A. C. N. Namibiar is another case in point – his crossover from socialist to Nazi collaborator (and, one might add, to Indian diplomat) seems to have been effortless and done without comment. Less politically self-conscious persons could hardly have been expected to avoid the vicissitudes of the times much better.

The question of 'fascism' remains to be addressed head on, and I have attempted this elsewhere. For now, I want to make a few quick points. There is a tendency to see post-Nazi activity outside Europe, and in particular in the colonised world, as instrumental, opportunistic and non-ideological. If we look outside the war situation itself, do we get a different set of conclusions? The theme of 'my enemy’s enemy' has often been used by historians. It works, perhaps, for the wartime scenario itself, or in the anticipation of a war. There is, however, not much commentary on how one chooses one’s friends.

As a major world ideology of the time, it would be surprising if no one actually thought about, or wrote about, or engaged with, Nazism or ‘fascism’ in positive terms at all. The question here is, for those who engaged with Nazism, in practical or ideological terms – what did they know? And why did they take it seriously? There is an ‘imperfect reception’ theory that operates often in this context – that no one read, still less accepted, all or most of Nazism, of Nazi ideology and of Nazi politics, in particular towards the Jews. Viewed by these standards, of course, there were very few Nazis in Germany, or even in the NSDAP. Less polemically expressed, this implies that every ideology is an ideal type, in Weberian terms, and it makes little sense to make a hard distinction between ‘true believers’ and ‘ignorant followers’ who ‘misunderstand’.

Much of the emotive necessity for an engagement with many of these ideas came from the problem of nationalism. A leftist tendency, at least contemporaneously, was to actually be slightly embarrassed about nationalism and/or regard nationalism as an interim solution to a wider range of problems: nationalism is
important only for a state not yet free, and when political independence comes, nationalism will cease to be the main theme. The main theme was how to achieve a certain amount of social equality leading to socialism. In this central narrative the argument is of a reaffirmation of the category ‘Hindu’ as the basis for the nation – ‘Hindu’ was often referred to as the Hindu ‘race’. The question now becomes how to organise this kind of folkish nationalism without disrupting the narrative of the legitimacy that an Indian national movement is trying to build.

A link figure in this process was Mohandas Gandhi: in a fundamentally spiritual society, allegedly the strength of the East as opposed to the West, securi-

Notes
3 Lucia Staiano-Daniels, ‘Nordic Hindus and Asians: India’s Ambivalent Role in Nari Racial Theory’, in this volume.
4 Eric Kurbander, ‘The Orientalist Roots of National Socialism? South Asian Spiritual-

6 So far, there is an unpublished PhD thesis on the subject, which for various reasons I find unsatisfactory, not least because it underplays and misunderstands contemporary politics, preferring instead to focus on intellectuals in a somewhat decontextualised manner. It is, however, a PhD thesis, and is owed a public life as a book before it is criticized in detail: Kris Manjapra, ‘The Mirrored World: Cosmopolitan Encounter between Indian Anti-Colonial Intellectuals and German Radicals, 1905-1939’, unpublished PhD thesis, Harvard University, 2007; Forthcoming: Age of Entanglement, Harvard University Press, November 2013.

1 The literature on this subject is not particularly analytically rich: see for instance Arun Coomar Bose, Indian Revolutionaries Abroad, 1905-1922. In the Background of International Developments, Pama: Bharati Bhavan, 1971; Vikas Raj Sareen, Indian Revolutionaries Movement Abroad (1905-1920), New Delhi: Sterling, 1979; Nirode K. Barooah, India and Official Germany 1880-1924, Frankfurt: Lang, 1977, pp. 157-228; Nirode K. Barooah, Chatto: The Life and Times of an Indian Anti-

Imperialist in Europe, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004; Frank Osterfeld, ‘Die Feind seines Freunds ist mein Freund’: Zur Tätigkeit des Indian Independent Committee (IC) während des Ersten Weltkrieges in Berlin, unpublished Magisterar-

beit, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 2004; Horst Krüger, ‘Die Dajal in Deutsch-


ings and contemporaneous reports, governmental or otherwise.


12 Barooah, Chattu, pp. 109-156.


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15 West Bengal State Archives (WBSA), Calcutta: Intelligence Bureau (IB): SI, No. 58/1926, File No. 166/26, fl.79-171.

16 See Franzaika Roy, "South Asian Criminal Prisoners of War in First World War Germany," in Franziska Roy et al. (eds), "When the War Began We Heard of Several Kings," pp. 53-95.

17 Rana and Zachariah, ‘To Take Arms Across a Sea of Trouble’.


19 File on "Indo-Swiss Co." IB SI No. 9/1920, File No. 167/20, WBSA, Calcutta.

20 India Office Records (IOR), British Library, London: L/PJ/12/17/1, fl.86.

21 IB SI No. 73/22, File No. 68/22, WBSA, Calcutta.

22 IOR: L/PJ/12/223.


24 Roy and Zachariah, 'The Life and Afterlife of the Berlin India Committee'.

25 Material related to these activities can be found in the papers of Carl Lindhagen, the then socialist Mayor of Stockholm, copies of which can be found in the Horst Krüger Stiftung, Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO), Berlin.


28 See also Noor-Usman A. Khan, Egyptian-Indian Nationalist Collaboration and the British Empire, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, esp. pp. 73-84.


33 Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML), New Delhi: All-India Congress Committee (AICC), Foreign Department, File No. FD 24-15. 1929.

34 IOR: L/PJ/12/223.

35 Joseph Ousterholt curated an exhibition on the subject for the Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, which is so far the best overview of the life of Indian students in Berlin; there is as yet no analysis of this in print, but of course biographical material and private correspondence acknowledges the link. See, however, Zahir Husain’s acknowledgment of the significance of his Berlin years, in a conversation address to Delhi University in 1962: Zahir Husain papers, Jamia Millia University, Delhi, ZHA V7-2-30.


37 This is acknowledged in the official history of the institute, to be found on the web, in: Indian-Institut e.v. München, available online at: www.indian-institut.de/en

chronicle (last accessed on 20 April 2013). Note the sudden jump to the Nazi period: nothing is said for the time between 1932 and 1946.

38 IOR: L/PJ/12/216.


41 Bundesarchiv, Berlin, RS1/16, RS1/8. Thierfelder was responsible for the document written in 1945 that claimed the Deutsche Akademie to be a non-Nazi institution; he cited Tarak Nath Das’s membership of the Indisches Auenrosch as grounds to claim it was non-Nazi, and he seeks to blame all its Nazi activities on Wust. See Bundesarchiv, Berlin, RS1/8, fl.200354 2003067, written in 1945. Thierfelder was back in charge of the Institute from 1946, alongside Tarak Nath Das: see www.indian-institut.de/en/chronicle (last accessed on 20 April 2013).

42 IOR: Indian Political Intelligence (IPI) file L/PJ/12/505, fl.80-81. From printed report: ‘Strictly Secret: An Examination of the Activities of the Aulands Organization of the National Socialist German Arbeits Partei [sic]; Part II: In India.’

43 Publicity materials for the India Institute, Munchen, distributed on the occasion of their 60th anniversary in 2003, do not mention the names of Ashok Bose and Benny Kumar Sarkar. An earlier version of the Indian-Institute’s website listed their names: see www.indian-institut.de (accessed 20 May 2010) but this has been replaced by the version cited above. Leonard Gordon, Brothers Against the Raj: A Biography of Indian Nationalists Sarat and Shibash Chandra Bose, New York: Columbia University Press, 1990, pp. 236-237, mentions Ashok Bose’s presence in Munich in 1931 in a student of applied chemistry. Benny Sarkar was also a regular contributor to Karl Haushofer’s journal, Geopolitik.


45 Soumyendranath Tagore, Hilterianen: The Aryan Role in Germany, Calcutta: Goenbadh, 1933.

46 IOR: L/PJ/12/273.

47 Intelligence Bureau file on Soumenendranath Tagore, IB SI No. 106/26, File No. 16626 HS Folder Part II, WBSA, Calcutta.

48 Horst Krüger papers, FMO, Berlin, Box 68, No. 457, 1.

49 Akademie zur wissenschaftlichen Erforschung und zur Pflege des Deutschhume, Bundesarbeit, Berlin, RS1/1, rules of the association, 1923, end of file, no page numbers.

50 Bundesarchiv, Berlin, RS1/16. Records of students are few and far between, and it is unclear as to whether they were destroyed by the vicissitudes of war or were deliberately destroyed.

51 Maharashtra State Archives (MSA), Bombay, Home Department (Special), files 80A, 1939 and 80K, 1939. See also Eugenie D’Souza, ‘Nazi Propaganda in India’, Social Scientist 28, 56 (May-June 2000), 77-90, based on the above two files, but lacking a context for them.

52 NAC: Home Department, Government of India, File No. 218/35/39 Poll. Int. ‘Consideration of Steps to be Taken to combat Nazi Activity in the Allgarth University’, pp. 1-7. Copy in Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Archives on Contemporary History (ACH), PC Joshi Archive, File 11-1939.


54 NAC: Home (Political), file 30/5/36, copy in JNU, ACH, PC Joshi Archive, File
The orientalist roots of National Socialism?

Nazism, occultism, and South Asian spirituality, 1919–1945

Eric Kurkunder

For nearly forty years following the Second World War, historians tended to view National Socialism as the inevitable byproduct of the German people’s long-term flirtation with romantic völkisch nationalism, Nordic mythology, and related occult ideas. More recent scholarship has suggested that the Third Reich, far from representing the apotheosis of völkisch esotericism, was in practice its nemesis, openly persecuting occult societies whose cosmopolitan notions of humanity were fundamentally opposed to fascism. Both narratives have important strengths. And yet there is one theme that has received little attention in either argument, which nonetheless causes us to rethink both: namely, the remarkable interest that many Nazis showed toward South and East Asian religions, spirituality, and esoteric practices.

This orientalist impulse in spiritual and occult matters represents an important aspect of what I call the Nazi “supernatural imaginary.” A variation on the philosopher Charles Taylor’s concept of the “social imaginary,” the supernatural imaginary constitutes a space in which “people imagine their social existence, how they integrate with others, and the deeper normative ideas that influence these expectations.” If political ideology “is often the acquisition of a small minority,” the supernatural imaginary “is shared by a whole society or large groups. [and] is described by images and legends; the imaginary is the common understanding that creates possible commonplace actions and a sense of legitimacy that is shared among all.”

Less coherent than a “political religion,” this supernatural imaginary drew on an array of popular Occult doctrines, folklore, and mythology, and alternative spiritual affinities to reorient the German social and political order, creating a space in which material reality could be overturned, distorted, and modified to serve the interests of the Third Reich.

To be sure, the supernatural imaginary frequently operated to define the enemies of National Socialism in a racist and anti-Semitic fashion, ascribing fantastical influence and “monstrous” qualities to an “enemy who did not seem to adhere to the same cultural code.” But it likewise created a discourse in which Nazi fantasies of emulation and “illegal identification” could take place, especially as it applied to South Asian religion, spirituality, and esotericism.