

Berlin Indian Independence Committee

By [Heike Liebau](#)

During the First World War, Berlin became an organisational hub for Indian nationalist and revolutionary activities. By September 1914, a group of South Asian emigrants had organized – with permission of and in cooperation with the German Foreign Office – the Berlin Indian Independence Committee (IIC). The Foreign Office together with the Political Office of the Reserve General Staff cooperated with exiles, revolutionaries and opposition groups from various nationalities (for example Egyptians, Persians and Georgians) in order to implement a strategy to "revolutionize" the enemies' colonies.

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The IIC and German Foreign Policy

The history of the Berlin Indian Independence Committee (IIC) has to be seen within the context of anti-colonial movements of South Asians outside the subcontinent as well as of the larger German "programme of revolution, aimed at destabilizing the Russian and British Empires."^[1] This strategy was based to a great extent on Max Freiherr von Oppenheim's (1860-1946) "Memorandum on revolutionizing the Islamic territories of our enemies" (1914). India, as Great Britain's biggest colony, was regarded as the Achilles heel of the Empire and therefore played a strategic role in this memorandum. German authorities assumed that anti-colonial uprisings could be anticipated soon in India and Germany attempted to support these developments.

In order to effectively implement this strategy, a special Information Service for the East (*Nachrichtenstelle für den Orient*, NfO) was founded within the Foreign Office in 1914. With support of the NfO, the IIC had mediated contacts to the Ghadar Party in America and to existing European networks of Indian revolutionaries in London, Bern, Geneva and Zurich in order to recruit members for the Committee. Famous Indians associated with the Berlin Committee were: Virendranath Chattopadhyaya (1880-1937), Abhinash Chandra Bhattacharya (1882-1962), Tarachand Roy (1890-1952), Mansur Ahmed (1898-1979), Maulavi Barakatullah (1854-1927), Taraknath Das (1884-1958), Birendranath Dasgupta, Bupendra Nath Dutta (1880-1961), and the brothers Abdel Jabbar Kheiri (1880-1958?) and Abdel Sattar Kheiri (1885-1953?).

Aims and Activities of the IIC

The main tasks of the Berlin Indian Independence Committee included: to prepare a mission to the Persian Gulf "in order to convince Indian troops there not to fight the Turkish and Persian armies"; to organise a mission to the Emir of Afghanistan in order to get permission to enter India with an Indian battalion from the Afghan territory and to carry out propaganda among South Asian prisoners of war in Germany, first of all in the so-called *Halbmondlager* in Wünsdorf.^[2] Thus, members of the IIC were involved in the famous Afghanistan mission led by Werner Otto von Hentig (1886-1984) in 1915. Others participated in the

production of the camp newspaper *Hindustan* (in Hindi and Urdu) for the South Asian prisoners of war in Germany.

In the course of the war it became obvious that plans to revolutionize India as well as the German *Jihad*-propaganda failed. Within the IIC, religious differences including the attitude towards Pan-Islamism, contradictory assessments of the actual situation in India and divergent political aims caused internal frictions. In 1917, individual committee members opened new branches in *neutral* countries such as *Switzerland, the Netherlands* and *Sweden*. At the end of the war, Berlin was no longer the centre of gravity for the "Indian revolutionaries abroad"^[3] and the dissolution of the Berlin Indian Independence Committee was officially announced.

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Notes

1. ↑ Jenkins, Jennifer: Fritz Fischer's "Programme for Revolution": Implications for a Global History of Germany in the First World War, in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 48/2 (2013), p. 402.
2. ↑ Liebau, Heike: The German Foreign Office, Indian Emigrants and Propaganda Efforts Among the 'Sepoys', in: Roy, Franziska / Liebau, Heike / Ahuja, Ravi (eds.): 'When the war began we heard of several kings' South Asian prisoners of war in World War I Germany, New Delhi: 2011, pp. 96-129, here p.105.
3. ↑ Bose, A. C.: *Indian revolutionaries abroad: 1905-1927*, New Delhi 2002.

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