

# Chattopadhyaya, Virendranath

By [Heike Liebau](#)

Chattopadhyaya, *Virendranath*

(Chatto)

Indian radical revolutionary, journalist, communist

Born 31 October 1880 in Hyderabad, India

Died 02 September 1937 in Moscow, Soviet Union

## Summary

Virendranath Chattopadhyaya belonged to the transnational networks of Indian political activists who, during the first decades of the 20th century, carried out anti-imperial and anti-colonial propaganda outside India, first in Europe and North America. During the First World War, Chattopadhyaya became a leading member of the Indian Independence Committee in Berlin.

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## Education and Formation of Political Positions

Virendranath Chattopadhyaya (1880-1937) was part of a large transnational network of Indian political activists who, during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, carried out organised anti-imperial and anti-colonial propaganda activities outside [India](#), first in Europe and North America. He grew up in an intellectual Bengali Brahmin family as the second of eight children. Among his siblings were the famous Bengali poet and musician [Harindranath Chattopadhyaya \(1898-1990\)](#) and the political activist, campaigner for women's rights, and renowned poet [Sarojini Naidu \(1879-1949\)](#).

Chatto studied in Madras and Calcutta before he entered Oxford University in 1902 and became a law student at the Middle Temple. Like other nationalist Indian students in [England](#),

he joined India House in Highgate, London where he contributed to the journal *The Indian Sociologist* published by [Shyamji Krishnavarma \(1857-1930\)](#). For a short period in 1909, Chatto was involved in the production of the journal *Talvar*. During his years in England, Chattopadhyaya established intensive contacts with revolutionary socialist and social democratic circles in Europe. Thus, in 1907 he participated in the Stuttgart Congress of the Second International. In 1910 Chatto, like other Indian political activists, moved from London to Paris and from there, in April 1914, to [Germany](#) where he enrolled in comparative linguistics at the University of Halle.

## Involvement in International Anti-imperialist Movements during the First World War

While during the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, London and Paris were central sites for the Indian anti-colonial movement<sup>1</sup>, with the outbreak of the First World War, Berlin became a hub for Indian revolutionary exiles. Chatto, already living in Germany in summer 1914, sought collaboration with the German Foreign Office and became a leading figure within the Indian Independence Committee (IIC), founded in Berlin in September 1914. Initiated and supported by the *Nachrichtenstelle für den Orient* (Information Service for the East), part of the German Foreign Office, the Committee was a loose association of South Asian political activists which had been built on earlier European and American networks. Despite the frictions within the Committee, it became a strong tool for Indian revolutionary and anti-colonial activities abroad. Together with other nationalist “independence committees”, the IIC was an important element of Germany’s so-called program for revolution which aimed at instigating unrest within the French, British, and Russian Empires. “Revolution was openly acknowledged as a means of warfare and as an aim of war”, argued Fritz Fischer.<sup>2</sup> Colonial inhabitants were actively involved in this strategy, thereby also pursuing their own political aims.

The IIC carried out [propaganda](#) in and outside India, first of all among Indian soldiers at the front as well as among [POWs](#). The Committee also engaged in military action and [weapons](#) training. Being a leading figure in the IIC and hoping for support from the German Foreign Office, Chattopadhyaya re-activated members of radical political networks, which existed before the war and invited other Indian activists like [Har Dayal \(1884-1939\)](#) to come to Germany. At the same time, Chattopadhyaya constantly enlarged and improved his international political alliances. In 1917, disenchanted with the role of Germany and with the conflicts among the IIC, Chattopadhyaya shifted the weight of his political activities to [neutral Sweden](#), where he established contacts with the Socialist International Comintern, especially Russian socialist circles.

## Activities and Conflicts within the Comintern Movement

Back in Germany, after the First World War, Chattopadhyaya founded the Indian Information Bureau, based in Berlin which engaged in improving Indian-German relations, including commerce and economic enterprises. The bureau also supported Indian students who came to study at German universities. At the same time, Chatto continued his collaboration with the Russian Bolsheviks and with the Communist International. In 1920, together with other former members of the now dissolved Berlin IIC, Chatto went to Moscow to present his "Thesis on India and the World Revolution" and to seek support from the Comintern for the anti-colonial struggle in India. However, the Berlin delegation's negotiations with the representatives of the Comintern were not successful. At this time, Chattopadhyaya also became active in the League against Imperialism. He was the co-organiser of the Brussels Congress of the League in 1927 and became one of its joint secretaries.

## Period of Repression in the Soviet Union

Chattopadhyaya spent the last years of his life in the Soviet Union. He moved there in 1931 and worked in Leningrad at the Institute of Anthropology and Ethnography of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. During the period of Stalin's repressions, he was accused of [espionage](#). Virendranath Chattopadhyaya was arrested and shot to death on 2 September 1937, having spent most of his life in exile in search of an applicable ideology to build a future world. He navigated his life through competing alliances and disconnections, through periods of active engagements as well as "silent moments".<sup>3</sup>

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## Notes

1. Owen, Nicholas: The Soft Heart of the British Empire. Indian Radicals in Edwardian London, in: Past & Present 2013 (220), pp. 143-184. [↑](#)
2. Fischer, Fritz: Germany's Aims in the First World War, New York, 1967, p. 133. [↑](#)
3. Aspengren, Henrik Chetan: Indian Revolutionaries Abroad: Revisiting Their silent moments, in: Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History, v. 15, n 3, 2014. [↑](#)

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- [Aspengren, Henrik Chetan: Indian Revolutionaries Abroad. Revisiting Their Silent Moments, in: \*Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History\* 15/3, 2014 \(Humanities Commons\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Laursen, Ole Birk: Revisiting the 1917 Stockholm Peace Conference. Indian Nationalism, International Socialism, and Anti-Imperialism, 11 April 2017 \(Imperial and Global Forum, University of Exeter\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Virendranath Chattopadhyaya \(The Open University\) \(Article\)](#)

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