BOSE’S REVOLUTION: HOW AXIS-SPONSORED PROPAGANDA INFLAMED NATIONALISM IN WARTIME INDIA

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HOW AXIS-SPONSORED
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MICHAEL CONNORS
ABSTRACT

After decades of subjugation under the British crown, India’s leaders at the onset of the Second World War were split on how to handle nationalist sentiment in their country. Part of the Indian National Congress, an independence-focused political party, these leaders were highly aware of the reality where many common Indian citizens would shed blood for a king that would not validate India as an independent state. Since negotiation seemed to prove fruitless, Subhas Chandra Bose, a savvy Indian political leader, decided action must be taken to remove the British Raj. In order to weaken British authority, Bose split from the INC — forming a shaky alliance with Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan in order to promote anger in Indian citizens through propaganda radio broadcasts. With Axis support, Bose waged an information war on the Allies, proclaiming a “Free India” while leading a provisional army. Meanwhile, Allied efforts to dissuade Indian citizens from Bose’s rhetoric through their own propaganda countermeasures may have not been as effective as initially intended.
For the majority of his life, Subhas Chandra Bose was not a militant revolutionary. Though India in the early 20th century was under complete colonial rule from the United Kingdom, Bose worked with the Indian National Congress (INC), a political party working in the Legislative Assembly whose ultimate goal was independence from the UK. A political scholar, Bose worked as a close apprentice of a great nationalist leader of early 20th century India, Chittaranjan Das. But after 20 years of working within the system, Bose slowly began to distaste the type of peaceful revolution that leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi were advocating. Bose knew passive resistance could hold up foreign powers, but that alone could not expel the British.

Bose was well versed in the political situation of Europe following the signing of the Treaty of Versailles and travelled to many European countries during the 1930’s. Keen to the growing tension caused by Adolf Hitler’s Nazi Germany and the rise of fascist ideology in Europe, Bose assessed the region’s situation in relation to India’s. In contemplating this, Bose had a realization. If Great Britain was about to be thrust into another global conflict, perhaps this would be the ultimate opportunity to take advantage of it’s foreign influencer’s weakness, stir up the citizenry of India, and gain full independence from the British crown. Indian legislator and former Speaker of the Indian Legislative Assembly Vithalbhai Patel helped shape Bose’s ideas such as how the Indian nationalist movement could not take on the task of independence alone. Bose determined that for India to truly be free, they must ask for foreign aid — and there was no place better to go than the UK’s military adversaries. When World War II broke out in 1939, Bose was quick to meet with Nazi officials in Germany. He was critical of the INC’s acquiescence to British involvement in European conflict, knowing the UK would use Indian soldiers in its fight against the Axis powers. Bose was shunned by party leaders, including
Gandhi. He was put behind bars by the British Raj for his treasonous rhetoric. When he finally managed to escape, Bose went to both Italy and Germany in an attempt to gain support for Indian independence. After starting a propaganda radio station from Germany, Bose eventually travelled to Imperial Japan where a puppet state in Singapore called Azad Hind (meaning “Free India,”) was created.  

After years of British rule, strategic propaganda efforts to exploit internal political disunion by the Axis powers during World War II inflamed a growing nationalist sentiment in India and was an immediate causation of the end of direct colonialism in the region.

I. INDO-NAZI COOPERATION

Bose arrived in Berlin in April of 1941, awed by the cultural and political heart of the ever-expanding and increasingly powerful German Reich. In his first meeting with the Nazi Under Secretary of State, Ernst Woermann, Bose was quick to suggest that as part of a coalition between his Indian nationalist movement and Germany, Hitler should send 100,000 troops to invade India and weaken British control in the region.  

It was then that Woermann understood the massive level of disconnect between Bose’s aspirations of a German-Indian coalition and Hitler’s political and military intentions. Bose had persuaded himself that Germany wanted nothing but to eradicate Great Britain from the world stage — yet Woermann and Hitler believed in something much different. For Nazi Germany, the goal was to ultimately reach an eventual one-sided peace with Great Britain; German leadership was hopeful for a war outcome which established their regime as the European hegemon.  

Since German leadership secretly prepared for the invasion of the Soviet Union, Bose’s main proposals of military intervention in India and

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3 Ibid. 30.
a new Indian government could not be guaranteed. But preliminarily, Nazi officials did see mutual benefit in one of Bose’s other ideas. German officials believed a coordinated subversion and intelligence effort with a stated goal to undermine British authority in India by appealing to a growing nationalist sentiment could benefit both Bose and Nazi Germany. It was at this point that Bose’s proposal to create an Indian radio station as a means of propaganda was actually met with a positive response from the Nazi Foreign Office. On May 3, 1941, Goebbels wrote in his diary that Hitler had been “giving serious thought to the question of whether he should establish an Indian National Government in Berlin.” More interested with using India to exploit a weakness of the British rather than any real desire to liberate India, Hitler eventually began to coordinate with the Foreign Office and German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop to begin exploring this option. But in May of 1941, Hitler and Ribbentrop decided to, instead of setting up a foreign government for India, create a “Free India Centre,” which were to be released with similar declarations of Middle Eastern nations as a means of propaganda offensive against the British.

Prepared to launch a massive propaganda campaign; Bose and Germany’s “Free India Radio” station had four main goals. The first was to work up revolution in India; the second was to inspire similar revolts in other Middle Eastern countries; the third was to convince Americans that they and the British were not really fighting for democracy; and the fourth was to sow the seed of distrust among other countries by claiming British imperialism was responsible for their

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5 Ibid. 38
problems. Bose planned on establishing as many branches of his propaganda effort to as many countries as he possibly could, whether they would be in secret or not. Bose traveled to Italy, seeking from the Italians what he could not receive from Germany, a declaration of India’s independence. Though Italy did agree to broadcast into India by their sponsored propaganda station “Radio Himalaya,” Bose did not get the agreement he was looking for. Neither Germany nor Italy were ready to declare India as a free state. Nevertheless, Bose and Nazi Germany continued their propaganda efforts. After a few months of Radio Himalaya broadcasts into India, by 1942 Bose finally was given the green light by the Germans to officially launch “Free India Radio,” which broadcasted daily into the country. Donning a new symbol of a springing tiger over the Indian Congress flag and transmitting their broadcasts in half a dozen Indian languages, “Azad Hind Radio” (Free India Radio) began the slow work of calling for revolt.

Operating as a genuinely independent radio station, Free India Radio broadcasted Indian classical music directly from the Indian service of the BBC, with the two daily news bulletins reporting news that was as accurate as possible to ensure long-term credibility and confidence among the Indian people. But Bose’s main goals of his propaganda machine were not hidden. Threaded alongside truthful news broadcasts and music the Indian people enjoyed were carefully calculated messages representing Bose’s nationalist political aims. Even Bose himself was not one to shy away from speaking on-air to the people in his country. In one speech broadcast on Free India Radio in May 1942, Bose explained to the people of India that they have but one enemy which “sucks the life-blood out of Mother India,” alluding to British imperialism. Bose

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9 Ibid. 52.
10 Ibid. 66.
11 Ibid. 66.
told the people of India that the war was a perfect opportunity for Indians to “bring about the downfall of the British Empire and the rise of a free and united India.” As a person who Indians both respected as a political leader and revered as a nationalist, Bose came across to the Indian people as an everyman figure. Propaganda Minister of Nazi Germany Joseph Goebbels was greatly satisfied with the operation Bose was putting on, as Bose followed closely the very same techniques Goebbels considered to be most important in a propaganda campaign. As a central independent authority, Bose was able to administer propaganda directives himself while also being able to explain propaganda directives to his staff. And since radio was used heavily in India, Goebbels was happy with the way Bose was able to gather the attention of Indian citizens by making the radio station a medium which people would be interested in.

Since Japan had dragged the United States of America into the European conflict in December of 1941, Bose searched for ways to propagandize Indian citizens to what he saw as cognitive dissonance between British Indian colonialism and an agreement set out in the Atlantic Charter that every country has a right to self-determination. After the Japanese took control of Singapore in February of 1942 and subsequently created the Indian National Army from British Indian soldiers that were prisoners of war, Bose saw this as decreasing British power in Asia. In a speech on Free India Radio on February 28, 1942, Bose attempted to explain the consequences for British hegemony in Asia after the fall of Singapore and how one-fifth of the

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15 Ibid. 8.
17 Ibid. 84.
human population was “suppressed and persecuted” by imperialism. In another speech from April 13, 1942, Bose attacked Indian leaders that supported the British as “Indian saviours of British imperialism,” and the United States of America as “the latest converts to imperialism.” Bose attempted to plainly point out what he believed was hypocrisy from the British government when they agreed with the United States that countries had a right to self-determine. To Bose, if other countries could determine their independence, what was so different about India? And for Indian leaders siding with the Allies like Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi, who were advocating for a peaceful transition of power, why they did not press the Allies for the right to self-determination? Bose and Nehru sparred constantly across the airwaves on these topics, each attempting to damage one another’s clout.

II. JAPANESE INTERVENTION IN INDIAN NATIONALISM

Before Bose began to negotiate in more serious terms with the Japanese Empire, anti-British Indian nationalists had for a long time been broadcasting propaganda into India from Tokyo — dating back even before the First World War. Japan, which was before World War I an ally of the British, only unofficially supported these propaganda efforts. By the beginning of 1943, Japan had been victorious in taking over territory in Southeast Asia, most notably Singapore from the Allies in 1942. Bose, naturally, wanted to take advantage of these successes as well. According to declassified documents by the current Indian government, it is believed that ultimately Bose had left Nazi Germany to work with the Japanese in early 1943 because, “he

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19 Ibid. 103.
20 Ibid. 123.
was unable to persuade the Nazi Regime to make a clear cut declaration that India will gain independence after the war and he may have been in fact convinced that the idea of the Nazis may be to replace British Rule in India by the German Rule.”  22 Though Germany continued to fund Free India Radio, in 1943 Bose decided to seek closer cooperation with Japan. He arrived in Japan by submarine and reached Tokyo by May. Bose came to the Japanese with demands similar to those he had made of the Germans. But rather than pushing the idea of declaring Indian independence underneath the rug, the Japanese gave Bose full support. Since Bose had been given the support he had always been looking for, he shifted his focus to the Indian National Army (INA). Bose believed this newly formed army should not operate as merely a military organization, but rather as a political tool in and of itself. He managed to convince the Japanese that military assistance by Japan to the INA against the British was necessary to maintain the Japanese “co-prosperity sphere,” an imperialist concept propagated by Japan to create a self-sufficient group of culturally and economically bound countries led by Japan. With the consent of Japan, Bose reorganized the INA and established himself as its leader. For months in 1943, Bose met with high-ranking Japanese officials in his quest to convince Japan that recognizing a free India was mutually beneficial to the Japanese maintenance of their political and military reach in Asia. Advocating for Azad Hind (Free India) to have it’s own physical geographical space on the world map, Bose met with Japanese Premier Tojo Hideki and from that meeting, Tojo proclaimed Japan would do whatever it could to help rid Asia of Anglo-Saxon influence.  23 The Provisional Government of Free India was announced by Bose in Singapore,


23 Ibid. 82.
it’s geographical location, on October 21, 1943 in a fiery speech. 24 The new Provisional
Government and the INA led by Bose now had a clear path toward a self-determining Indian
state. The Japanese press gave an substantial amount of publicity to the new government and the
INA, and from day one, the newfound legitimacy proved itself to be a highly effective tool for
Bose in the realm of propaganda.

“On to Delhi” was the INA’s war cry in what Bose called India’s final war of
independence. 25 Bose believed that symbolically, the INA had significant capability to be a
major psychological asset for sparking revolution in India once it had made its way into the
country. Though he knew the INA stood no chance against the British and American military,
Bose was under the impression that small conflicts instigated by the INA on the border of India
would push Indian citizens to rise up against the British rule. As the Supreme Commander of the
INA with a knack for politics and propaganda, Bose managed to appeal to not only the patriotism
of Indian officers to recruit them for the INA, but also to influence the Japanese as well. To
Indian soldiers and citizens, Bose made the argument that serious political repercussions could
be a result of any Allied military campaign on east India. To the Japanese, he persuaded officials
to allow one INA regiment to take part in any future campaign near Imphal, a strategically
important area to the Japanese in east India. 26 Bose made the INA a symbol of India’s
independence, and over time, was able to effectively use the INA as a complex medium through
which propaganda could spread. Since the Provisional Government in Singapore and the

Government of India, December 4, 1967. Pg. 84
25 Ibid. 84.
26 Ibid. 85.
Germans and Italians still were operating both Free India Radio and Radio Himalaya, Bose had propaganda elements on all fronts.

One of the most significant instances of Bose using the INA as propaganda came during the Burma campaign in 1944, when the Japanese feared an Allied counter-attack to take back Burma, a region that was essential for Japan’s Co-Prosperity Sphere. In an attempt to protect Burma from any possible Allied invasion, Japanese military officials signed off on a plan in January 1944 to begin moving troops toward Imphal as a way to strengthen Japanese influence in the region. Though Japanese officials saw this offensive as a way to keep military control of a region they believed to be the crux of their foreign power, Bose saw the opportunity as a means through which he could introduce the INA to the region as Japanese forces moved toward India. Since Bose was convinced the creation of revolutionary conditions in India was essential to the INA’s success, Bose moved INA troops into Burma to coordinate with the Japanese. Between February and May of 1944, two INA battalions moved west into the Arakan sector and Bishenpur in the Imphal sector on Indian soil. Bose, seeing this as a massive victory, issued a proclamation asking Indian citizens to cooperate with the INA and Japan as they occupied parts of India. Control of these areas within India prompted the Provisional Government to begin to set up civil administration in these areas. But the success of the INA and Japan in these “liberated” areas did not last long. Bose did not have any means of control over what was happening in the areas of India that the INA had control over, and by July, the leading forces in

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28 Ibid. 170.
29 Ibid. 175.
30 Ibid. 177.
31 Ibid. 178.
the area had decided to withdraw as constant stress from the Allies had made it impossible to set up a branch of the Provisional Government in this area of India. Following this defeat, Bose was still confident there was a path toward retaking India, but due to the lack of Japanese soldiers and resources, the opportunity for foreign help waned. When Japan finally surrendered to the Allied forces in August 1945, Bose was dispatched to Japan for consultation regarding what to do about his Provisional Government. On his way to Tokyo, the plane that was carrying Bose crashed — killing him at the age of 48. Though Bose did not personally witness his ultimate goal of retaking India from the British, the propaganda techniques that he and the rest of the Axis powers used through primarily the radio and through the symbolic Indian National Army were concerted efforts at co-opting an already fervent anti-British nationalist sentiment in India. Nazi Germany, Italy and Imperial Japan may not have been entirely interested in the liberation of India, however they saw in the mutually-beneficial nature of Bose’s proposals a great opportunity to weaken one of the largest Allied powers in a strategic location.

III. ALLIED COUNTERMEASURES

The Allied forces did not allow for Bose’s revolutionary propaganda in India without countermeasures of their own. But consequently, the United Kingdom knew of the opposition it garner from the Indian people when war on Germany was declared in 1939. India knew British conflict would involuntarily commit thousands of Indians into a massive, bloody war. In response to the war declaration, the political party in control of India’s government called the Indian National Congress (INC) attempted to broker an agreement with the British. The INC proposed that in order to support the war effort, the United Kingdom would have to loosen its

32 Ibid. 180.
colonial power over the country. As a repercussion of that failed attempt of negotiations, the British took control over many of India’s material possessions for use in the war effort. Two and a half million south Asians served under British command in the war, and the United Kingdom nationalized many of the railway companies to better move materiel created in India during the war. Indian political leaders were displeased with a seeming lack of British cooperation. In March 1942, the British government decided to respond to dissenting leaders with a proposal, known as the Cripps offer, which granted India “dominion” status after the war rather than full independence. For INC leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, dominion status did not go far enough. As a result, the “Quit India” movement was led by Gandhi in 1942 — calling for wide-spread peaceful civil disobedience aimed at forcing the British out of India. The Quit India movement was an eventual failure as many political leaders were imprisoned and the British controlled too many established institutions such as the military. But British propaganda in the region was oddly tone-deaf. Since the British had taken over the railway system for military use, the United Kingdom throughout the massive “Quit India” protests continued to attempt to persuade Indian citizens to their cause, only frustrating Indian citizens more. A misplaced sense of “national duty” forced upon the Indian citizens through propaganda urged Indians to not misuse the railway systems was prevalent throughout India. Slogans like “Help the railways to help you,” upset many Indians as they did not want to listen to a government that did not pay attention to


Ibid. 186.

Ibid. 188.

Ibid. 196.
their demands. Frustrated Indians who were part of the “Quit India” movement saw these efforts as only another example of British apathy toward the cause of independence — giving nationalist leaders such as Bose and Gandhi more leverage over the citizenry.

For the United States of America the situation in India was much more complex, as their duties to the Allies were not always in align with quintessentially American ideals like self-determination. Though it was a nation where many of its citizens opposed colonialism, the US fought alongside one of the most powerful imperialist countries of the time, the United Kingdom. And because the United States and Great Britain had signed the Atlantic Charter in 1941, which guaranteed the moral obligation for powerful countries to give other countries the right to self-determination, America was stuck in a difficult situation. Because of these two facts, United States President Franklin Delano Roosevelt had a difficult time creating a diplomatic policy toward India. As part of the “Quit India” movement, Gandhi had managed to convince

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Indians that the United States had only one of two options — to either commit itself to colonialism or support the cause of Indian independence. In response to this, America created a propaganda campaign over time which, instead of fully supporting one side over another, created a more complex diplomatic situation. Mostly, the United States created an atmosphere through propaganda committed to “allaying present Indian discontent.” Through radio, leaflets, and movies, the American propaganda effort attempted not to stimulate the Indian people’s will to take part in the war on behalf of the Allies and to increase the United States standing among Indian citizens, but also to not fully commit to either side of the debate over independence.

American propaganda shifted toward an attempt to increase perception of American global influence as a bastion for freedom and “humanity,” instead of calling attention to it’s non-committal nature regarding the case of Indian independence. Propaganda from the time in India claimed America was “fighting to extend fundamental liberties,” with many pieces of propaganda exemplifying Roosevelt’s “Four Freedoms,” and American exceptionalism.

American psychological operations in India may have succeeded in their purpose to not choose a side in the question of Indian independence, but it may have inadvertently furthered the cause by instilling values of freedom and self-determination.

IV. THE PARTITION OF 1947

After the end of World War II and Bose’s death, India was broken. A tone-deaf effort by United Kingdom aimed at propagandizing Indian citizens during the “Quit India” movement and

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41 Ibid. 278.
42 Ibid. 280.
43 Ibid. 288.
44 Ibid. 288-289.
a push toward democratic values by American propaganda only furthered anti-imperialist sentiment in India. After the war, when the government of India was forced by the British to initiate treason proceedings against some of the INA officials, many nationalist leaders in the INC came to their aid. Soldiers in the INA, however, did not receive this same defense. The British hoped to expose disloyalty by putting these officials on trial, yet the response these officials received from the public were overwhelmingly positive. To members of the Indian National Congress, it had finally seemed as if nationalism in India had been strengthened and forever solidified by Bose’s propaganda. When the trials opened for the first time, the entire state of India became increasingly offended by British attempts to smear nationalist leaders of the most recent conflict. During the war the British had attempted to portray Bose as a puppet of the Japanese. However, British leaders were privately aware that he was an independent actor purely motivated by his hatred of British rule. Though the British were particularly adept at spreading this rumor, the effect Bose and the rest of the Indian nationalists had on instilling patriotism and values of freedom and self-determination in the Indian people. After the conviction of the British officers and the subsequent outcry of Indian citizens, elections in 1946 heavily favored the nationalist Indian Congress Party. Britain had finally lost its legitimacy over Indians, and agreed to remove themselves from the region with the Partition of 1947, splitting their former territory into both independent India and Pakistan.

Without question, Bose did collude with authoritarian dictators who were responsible for the merciless genocide of millions of people across the world. The alliances which Bose had made to initiate his propaganda measures can be considered atypical and have left an equivocal

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46 Ibid. 95-96.
legacy. But what does remain throughout all of his propaganda efforts is that Bose was truly committed to the cause of Indian independence. Since he was so devoted to a free India, Bose never had to lie about where his loyalties were. He was able to effectively communicate through generalizations, and many of the things he had presented the Indian people with were said with the stated goal to create revolution. But more important than anything else, Bose was able to disseminate a message of freedom from foreign influence and patriotism to Indians. And even though he had passed before he was able to see it, Bose’s vision for an independent India did eventually become a reality.
WORKS CITED


