

Romain Hayes. *Subhas Chandra Bose In Nazi Germany: Politics, Intelligence, and Propaganda 1941-43.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. xxx + 249 pp. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-80018-1.



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Why does a land that has had no history of anti-semitism revere a man who allied himself with the Third Reich and the Axis powers? The man in question, Subhas Chandra Bose, was everything that the Indian freedom movement and its leading figures was not--while Mohandas Gandhi eschewed violence, Bose was the founder of the Indian National Army (INA), and while Jawaharlal Nehru and Gandhi positioned the Indian National Congress (INC) largely in support of the democratic allies, Bose led the INA in concert with Axis troops against the Raj in Southeast Asia.

In this book, Romain Hayes takes up the task of analyzing Bose's relationship with Nazi Germany. Although there have been several academic tomes written on the Bengali leader, including the magisterial *Brothers Against the Raj* (1990) by Leonard Gordon and *His Majesty's Opponent* (2011) by Bose's own grand-nephew, Sugata Bose, none has specifically addressed the uncomfortable topic of Bose's association with Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler. Hayes accesses official documents of the Third Reich and its officials for the

first time on this topic, as well as Indian sources on Bose to shed light on this facet that many consider to be a taint on the Indian leader's otherwise illustrious career.

Bose was introduced to fascist ideology when he was incarcerated by the British in 1930 for "sedition and unlawful procession." In that wonderful educational institution, a British prison, Bose read Francesco Nitti's *Bolshevism, Fascism, and Democracy* and Ivanoe Bonomi's *From Socialism to Fascism*. Oddly, the two socialist prime ministers' impact on Bose was such that in his first public reference to fascism, he described it as "efficiency and discipline," which, as Hayes remarks correctly, misses large aspects of the political ideology (p. 7). Bose's first trip to Europe was for medical reasons in February 1933. However, that summer, he visited Berlin for the first time, where Adolf Hitler had just come to power. Received by the mayor, Bose tried to meet with Hitler, to no avail, to convince him that the derogatory comments about Indians in *Mein Kampf* were entirely wrong in judgment and

should be excised in future reprints (!). Through the 1930s, Bose continued to visit Germany (and Italy) and make contacts with government officials. He grew closer to Mussolini, and though he continued to engage with Berlin, Bose was not sparing in his criticism of Nazi race policy--when Hitler referred to white superiority in a speech in 1936, Bose denounced the Führer in a press conference in Geneva and advocated a trade boycott of Germany; similarly, Bose rebutted strongly Hermann Göring's disparaging remarks on Gandhi. By the end of the decade, Bose was thoroughly disillusioned by the Nazis. Explaining his change of heart, he stated, "Fascism had not started on its imperialist expedition, and it appeared to me merely an aggressive form of nationalism" (p. 19).

However, neither Bose nor the Nazis could keep away from each other for long. Disappointed at his undemocratic ouster by Gandhi from the presidency of the INC in 1939, by early 1941, Bose sought to return to Europe. He watched Germany's early successes in the European war with increasing admiration and was convinced of an Axis triumph. This time, however, Bose had not come merely to establish contacts and put the case of India's independence before the fascist powers but to make concrete proposals regarding cooperation between Nazi Germany and India. As Hayes notes, the situation had changed drastically from the previous decade--Hitler was now locked in a war in Britain and saw support for Indian independence as a useful tool against the former. And thus it would remain until the end of the war, when Axis reversals finally extinguished any hope of the liberation of India by armed might.

Hayes's portrayal of what transpired between Bose and his European interlocutors from 1941 to 1943 when the firebrand Indian left Germany for the last time reveals a fascinating picture of Nazi policies and war aims as well as painting Bose as a shrewd if sometimes naïve political operator. Hitler viewed German support of an independent India as a bargaining chip with which to bring the

British to the negotiating table. Despite being at war with the island nation, the German dictator was in awe of Britain and her empire and had stated many times that Russia would be to Germany what India was to Britain. Germany hoped to persuade Britain to stop the war in the west so that it could devote its attention to the Soviet Union in the east. To that end, supporting Indian independence might be the necessary shock to the empire that would coerce the British into giving up their war against Germany. Ultimately, Hitler did not understand his opponent well.

On Bose's part, perhaps blinded by his hatred of the British Empire, he did not seem to see through the Führer's intentions for India. He kept pushing Hitler (and Mussolini) to declare for an independent India, train Indian POWs captured from British forces, and plan an INA-led invasion of British India. He even floated the idea of a joint Nazi-Soviet-Italian-Japanese "Quadruple Alliance" (p. 148) against Britain, whose first order of business would be to strike a blow at the heart of the Raj. As Hayes notes, in such flights of fancy, Bose completely failed to account for German interests in supporting his designs. Nonetheless, Hitler did order the Operations Staff of his High Command to plan an invasion of India through Afghanistan, even if he didn't declare for Indian independence, and Joachim von Ribbentrop, the Nazi foreign minister, allotted one million *Reichsmarks* for German preparatory operations in Afghanistan. On the matter of public Axis support for a free India, Ribbentrop explained to Bose, "it was a guiding principle of German policy not to promise anything which could not be carried out later" (p. 69). Hitler would also later tell Bose that "a platonic declaration to grant freedom to peoples" was useless "as long as the military situation does not allow the enforcement of this guarantee, if necessary even with arms" (p. 107). Bose was also able to get support for a Free India Centre in Berlin as well as a radio station blaring anti-British propaganda into India.

To discredit Bose, the British portrayed him as an Axis stooge, and this has remained the perception held by many. However, nothing could be farther from the truth. As Hayes demonstrates, Bose was not a Nazi, even though he may have had an authoritarian streak. Bose's pro-Soviet sympathies caused a little difficulty with Berlin, and the Bengali had insisted that Indian troops not be used on the eastern front against the Soviets. Bose was also critical of the Nazi regime's racial policies, and vocally so. In his dalliance with Berlin, his sole purpose was the liberation of his motherland from British rule. Furthermore, the Third Reich didn't treat the Indian leader like a puppet, as they had done with many of their European and Arab allies. Emilie Schenkl, Bose's Austrian secretary, with whom he fell in love and later married, never received a quiet visit from the Gestapo, asking her to cease her relationship with Bose. Hitler even went as far as to say that his comments about Indians in his *Mein Kampf* were a "thing of the past" when Bose raised the issue with him. There is reason, as Hayes uncovers, to believe that the Nazi leadership genuinely liked Bose--Heinrich Himmler, Joseph Goebbels, and Ribbentrop eulogized him, or were at least friendly. Even the Führer was impressed with Bose, stating to an aide once that Bose's star had eclipsed Nehru's (p. 90). This is indeed noteworthy, coming from men used to disparaging other powerful men. Ironically, it was Bose who referred to Hitler as *bada pagal* (raving mad).

While the author does not delve into Bose's personality and thinking too much, he does indicate that Bose was fully aware of the risk of substituting British rule for German if he wasn't careful. He warned his countrymen against receiving independence as a gift from other foreign powers but insisted that there was nothing wrong in seeking foreign assistance, especially as the British had "been going round the world with the begging-bowl, asking for men, money, and munitions, not only from the free nations of the world, but also from enslaved countries like India" (p. 111).

Neither did Bose work in a vacuum--his actions and efforts were noted in India by his supporters and the INC, and though Nehru had no patience for Bose, Gandhi held some respect for the man.

The inevitable question that remains is that of Europe's Jewry and Bose. As Hayes elucidates, Bose was deeply disturbed by the treatment of Jews and other "undesirables" by the Germans. Yet he was willing to look away and maintain a relationship with the fascist power only in so far as they could assist Indian independence. His only criticism of a defeated Germany after the war was that it should not have made the mistake of fighting on two fronts simultaneously. While Hayes declares it difficult for history to absolve Bose for his dalliance with Nazi Germany, he is also quick to accept that as a radical nationalist, Bose never had any concern for anything except Indian independence (p. 166). Thus, despite their differences, Bose's motivation for harnessing the Nazi war machine was a strong sense of anti-British *realpolitik*.

Finally, Hayes's work raises a question, perhaps unintentionally, that is most important in today's increasingly globalized world: how do we judge actions that were intended to achieve a noble cause but collected unsavory allies in the process? In that sense, Hayes's work is an excellent microscopic view of the larger dilemma posed by Michael Bess in his *Choices Under Fire: Moral Dimensions of World War II* (2008). While accepting that the Nazis were evil and had to be stopped, Bess shows that the war was not, as is commonly believed, a battle between good and evil. How does one account for eugenics, racism, and the oppression of over half the world under the yoke of imperialism as characteristics of the side that ostensibly fought for freedom and democracy? How can we countenance an alliance with Josef Stalin, who was an even greater mass murderer than Hitler?

On this matter, Winston Churchill once remarked, "If Hitler invaded Hell, I would at least

make a favorable reference to the Devil in the House of Commons.” Similarly, for Bose, British occupation of his homeland was of paramount importance and the struggle in Europe was not his battle to fight. While Bose may have rejected Nazi ideas, his frame of reference was the racism, famine, and brutality his country experienced at the hands of the British. This tension in the balance between the global and the local is present even today—U.S. alliances with leaders like Yahya Khan, Saloth Sar, Augusto Pinochet, and Saddam Hussein, or groups like the Taliban, however temporary and for whatever reasons, may be viewed as unforgivably in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Chile, Iraq, and Afghanistan as a European or Hayes would see an alliance with the Third Reich.

What is truly impressive about Hayes’s effort is that there is a relative paucity of sources on Indo-German diplomacy during the Third Reich—India was never a major Nazi objective, nor was it a significant *independent* actor in World War II (at its peak, the Indian contingent of His Majesty’s armed forces numbered over 2.5 million). Nevertheless, Hayes has put together a lucid exposition of this difficult subject with the available German documentation, interviews with contemporary witnesses, British documents, and Indian sources on Bose. Unless there is a treasury of sources yet to be discovered, the author has woven the existing material on Bose in a concise and revealing narrative.

Subhas Chandra Bose in Nazi Germany is not a biography, and therefore does not, and does not intend to, give the reader a full understanding of the Bengali leader’s thinking. The book does not discuss the events and experiences that formed the young Bose, and what led him, after an education at Cambridge, to quit the prestigious Indian Civil Service and join India’s freedom struggle. While these are undoubtedly legitimate questions, they can be answered by other works. Hayes wishes to dwell, instead, on a part of Bose’s life that has not received proper scholarly attention

yet, and in that succeeds marvelously. If you were to read just one book on Subhas Chandra Bose, this would not be it, but if you were to read two, Hayes’s work must certainly be one of them.

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