



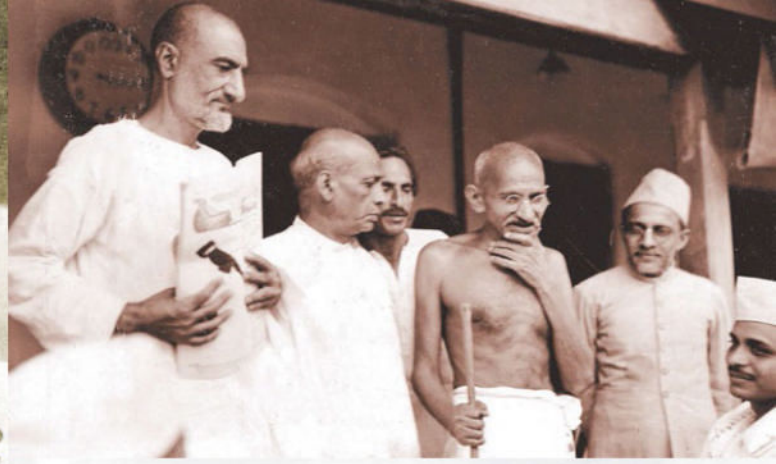
ENEMY OF MY ENEMY

In the quest for India's independence, one fervent nationalist made a pact with the Axis to overthrow the British Raj **By Rafe McGregor**



As head of the militant Indian Independence League, Subhas Chandra Bose (above, seated beside Heinrich Himmler) chose unsavory bedfellows in his armed bid to end British rule.

BPK, BERLIN/BAYERISCHE STAATSBIBLIOTHEK/AROHIV
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Above: Bose was one among the self-rule movement who believed only violence would topple the Raj. Top right: Mahatma Gandhi confers with members of the Indian National Congress in 1939 after it forced Bose to resign as president of that body. Right: Bose meets with Adolf Hitler in June 1942 while seeking Axis recognition of an independent India.

Shortly after 2 p.m. on Aug. 18, 1945, a Mitsubishi Ki-21 twin-engine bomber turned transport of the Imperial Japanese Army Air Force lifted off from the island of Formosa (present-day Taiwan). The plane was bound for Manchukuo—Tokyo’s puppet state in northeast China—but just after takeoff the bomber lost its port engine, spun out of control and crashed to the ground.

While the pilots and senior passenger, a Japanese general, were killed instantly, several others, including the two other VIPs aboard, initially survived the crash. One of the VIPs had been drenched in fuel from the aircraft’s ruptured tanks, and as he and his companion struggled to escape the tangled wreckage, his fuel-soaked clothing ignited, turning him into a human torch. Though rescuers managed to smother the flames, the badly burned man died within hours.

Though horrific, his death was in many ways something of an anticlimax. For most of his adult life the man had been a prominent Indian nationalist and controversial figure in his country’s effort to win independence from Britain. Colonial authorities had repeatedly jailed him, but it is for his activities in the two years before his death for which he is most often remembered. His name was Subhas Chandra Bose, and he was head of the Japanese-allied and -supported Indian National Army.

Great Britain had ruled much of the Indian subcontinent since the mid-19th century, and by the early 20th century several native Indians had emerged to lead the movement toward *swaraj* (Hindi for “self-rule”). The most famous of these nationalists was Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, better known by the honorific *mahatma* (Sanskrit for “venerable”). Gandhi assumed leadership of the Indian National Congress in 1921 and stressed that nonviolent resistance to British rule was the pathway to independence. Less well known are the contributions made by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, longtime head of the Muslim League, and Bose, who in 1943 became head of the Indian Independence League. Bose was a Bengali from Cuttack in eastern India who eschewed a career in the Indian Civil Service for a life of political activism. Unlike Gandhi and Jinnah, he believed only violence would succeed in freeing India from British hegemony.

In World War I the British Raj had contributed 1.4 million men to the empire’s armed forces. These troops had initially served on the Western Front, but the combination of heavy losses with a particularly cold winter caused morale to flag, and the two Indian divisions were redeployed to Mesopotamia in 1915. Two years later, in recognition of India’s service and sacrifice, the British government made its first concessions toward Indian self-rule. Less than six months

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: PICTURES FROM HISTORY/BRIDGEMAN IMAGES; A.G. IMAGES/ARCHIV PETER RÜHE; SUEDEUTSCHE ZEITUNG PHOTO/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



German-uniformed Sikh members of the Free India Legion train along the Normandy coast of France. Formed in January 1942, the legion comprised Indian Army prisoners of war whom Bose persuaded to join the Nazis.

after war's end, however, Anglo-Indian relations soured in the wake of the April 13, 1919, Jallianwala Bagh massacre, when British-led Gurkha riflemen fired on a peaceful protest in Amritsar, Punjab, killing several hundred civilians and wounding more than 1,000. The Indian National Congress transformed from a political elite into a mass movement in the 1920s, and as civil disobedience and political violence soared in subsequent years, Britain responded with mass detentions. On July 2, 1940, Bose was arrested for his role in a brewing demonstration in Calcutta. He languished in prison for months.

In late November he went on hunger strike, resisted forced feeding and was released to house arrest in Calcutta a week later, a month before he was due to stand trial for sedition. Bose had long believed in the need for external support against the British, and Soviet anti-imperialism made Russia the logical choice. He escaped from house arrest in mid-January, travelled to Afghanistan and attempted to gain entry to the Soviet Embassy in Kabul. After three days of refusals, he tried the Italian Embassy. The Italians kept him in Kabul for six weeks, eventually routing him via Moscow to Berlin, where he arrived in early April 1941. There Bose sought Axis recognition of an independent India, and in May he took the first steps toward raising an anti-Allied Indian unit, on agreement that all

Indian Army prisoners of war would be sent to Annaburg camp near Dresden. When Bose visited the camp in December to recruit troops, the prisoners were initially hostile, but his charisma proved persuasive, and the Free India Legion formed in January 1942. In all some 2,600 men served in the legion, though it saw little action.

Adolf Hitler's continued refusal to recognize Indian independence convinced Bose to seek support for his cause elsewhere. On Feb. 9, 1943, he left Germany aboard the submarine *U-180*, from which he transferred to the Japanese sub *I-29* in the Indian Ocean. By mid-May Bose was in Tokyo.

In the weeks following the December 1941 outbreak of war in the Pacific the Japanese had made seemingly unstoppable advances in Southeast Asia, beginning with amphibious landings in southern Thailand and northern Malaya. The Japanese steamrolled nearly 600 miles in 55 days, taking 50,000 Indian, Australian and British prisoners. On Feb. 15, 1942, Lt. Gen. Arthur Percival—the British commander in Malaya—surrendered at Singapore, leading 85,000 more soldiers, half of them Indian, into Japanese captivity. On March 7 the British evacuated the Burmese capital of Rangoon and retreated north. The arrival of the monsoon season in May brought a halt to operations and found Japanese forces on the banks of the Chindwin River, poised to enter India.



By mid-1942 the Japanese had occupied much of Southeast Asia and were preparing to enter India through Burma, a campaign in which the INA played a key role. Right: A Japanese soldier adjusts a Sikh's camouflage.

Among the forces tapped to participate in the Japanese invasion was the Indian National Army (INA). The INA had initially formed in Malaya in mid-1942 under the direction of Japanese liaison officer Major Iwaichi Fujiwara and Captain Mohan Singh, a Punjabi officer whom the Japanese had placed in charge of all Indian POWs. By that fall some 40,000 Indians had pledged allegiance to Singh, who had been promoted to general, and he aimed to recruit an army of 250,000 men to spearhead the liberation of India. Singh was no diplomat, however, and did not hide his antagonism toward all imperialists, European and Asian alike. While he quickly raised the first division of the INA, the Indian commander spent the second half of 1942 in a series of bitter arguments with his Japanese superiors over almost every aspect of the force. In late December the Japanese dismissed and arrested Singh. Learning that Bose was en route to Tokyo, they put the INA's formation on hold (the terms First INA and Second INA are sometimes used to distinguish Singh's administrative unit from Bose's combat unit).

Soon after his arrival in the Japanese capital Bose met with Prime Minister Hideki Tojo, and they quickly reached an agreement: Japan would recognize Indian independence but maintain a military presence in liberated India until the conclusion of the war. On July 4 Bose took command of the INA, and on October 21 he was sworn in as prime minister of the Provisional Government of Free India.

The INA was allied to, rather than a component of, the Japanese imperial armed forces and had two primary goals: the liberation of India and the formation of a defense force to maintain independence. When Bose took command, the

INA comprised the 1st Division, 12,000 troops divided into four regiments (the Japanese term for a brigade-sized unit) under the command of Lt. Col. Mohammad Zaman Kiani. There was also a special forces unit, later called the Bahadur Group, and a unit of female soldiers and nurses, the Rani of Jhansi Regiment (which never saw combat). In addition to the pool of tens of thousands of POWs, the INA also recruited from the Indian populations of Malaya, Burma and Singapore, and there was never a shortage of volunteers.

Still, the INA suffered from organizational problems. First and foremost was poor leadership. Many junior officers had risen through the ranks without the benefit of leadership training, and most senior officers had been junior officers in the British Indian Army and promoted without attending staff college. Bose himself was a politician and not a soldier. Though his decision to leave field command to his officers was wise, it deprived the INA of his force of character and personal magnetism. Another problem the INA faced was a lack of suitable equipment—its units were lightly armed, with all four regiments of the 1st Division (the Subhas, Gandhi, Azad and Nehru) designated as “guerrilla” instead of “infantry” troops. Despite Bose's drive and enthusiasm, the Japanese remained concerned about the loyalty and combat readiness of INA troops, so it was agreed only the Subhas (1st Guerrilla Regiment) and four Bahadur Group units (each company strength) would initially participate in the invasion of India.

The Japanese plan was to launch a diversionary attack in Burma's Arakan region with the Twenty-Eighth Army, following which the Fifteenth Army would cross the Chindwin

Bose and Tojo reached an agreement: Japan would recognize Indian independence but maintain a military presence in liberated India



An INA soldier and his loader put a British .303-caliber Vickers machine gun to use against its former owners.

River into the northeastern Indian region of Manipur and make for the towns of Imphal and Kohima. It was during the diversion in Arakan the INA scored its first combat success.

On Feb. 4, 1944, a Bahadur Group under Captain L.S. Misra infiltrated the British lines and overran the 7th Indian Infantry Division headquarters. The Japanese Twenty-Eighth Army—which included the 1st Battalion of the Subhas—fought its way to the Indian border. In April INA troops took Moirang, and the town became the army's first headquarters on Indian soil. Meanwhile, the Fifteenth Army crossed the Chindwin and entered India on March 19, with the 2nd and 3rd Battalions of the Subhas undertaking counterinsurgency operations against British-led Chin guerrillas. In late April the INA's Gandhi (2nd Guerrilla Regiment) suffered heavy losses in its failed attempt to secure a critical airfield at Palel. By then both Imphal and Kohima were under siege by Japanese forces, but British defenses were holding. The INA's Azad (3rd Guerrilla Regiment) joined the fray in late May, but the British broke siege of Imphal on June 22, and on July 3 the Japanese began withdrawing. INA units were among those assigned to cover the Japanese retreat, which threatened to become a rout as the monsoon exacerbated widespread disease and supply problems. The Nehru (4th Guerrilla Regiment) and the first regiment of the newly raised INA 2nd Division were ordered forward but were

unable to reach the front before the Japanese halted operations. When the Nehru was ordered to Myingyan from Mandalay, 600 soldiers refused. Bose then placed the regiment under the command of one of his most reliable—and controversial—officers, Major Gurbaksh Singh Dhillon.

The attempted invasion of India was ultimately a disaster for the Japanese and their INA allies. Of the 6,000 Indian combatants involved only 2,600 returned, of which 2,000 were hospitalized with malaria, malnutrition or both. Casualty estimates recorded some 400 killed in action, 1,500 dead of disease or starvation, 800 captured and 715 deserted. The INA had also failed to have the anticipated propaganda impact, in part due to a British-imposed media blackout on all mention of the INA, a strategy that successfully prevented the outbreak of nationalist violence within the borders of the Raj.

Despite such setbacks, Bose continued to recruit, preparing for the defense of Burma in the face of the expected British assault. By late 1944 the INA had almost reached its goal of 35,000 men and women under arms, per agreement with the Japanese, and included three divisions, the Bahadur Group, and the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, spread across Burma and Malaya.

The Japanese retreat from Imphal had continued to the Irrawaddy River, although the front at Arakan had remained

INA troops wearing British helmets and carrying British Lee-Enfield rifles—likely captured by the Japanese in Singapore—prepare to assault an Indian Army position during the Burma Campaign.



static during the monsoon. The British offensive began in December, with the 81st (West Africa) Division swiftly retaking the territory lost in the Arakan. On Jan. 14, 1945, the British IV Corps crossed the Irrawaddy at Thabbeikkyn, near Mandalay, and established several bridgeheads.

On Feb. 14, the 7th Indian Infantry Division attempted to cross the Irrawaddy at Nyaung-U and Pagan. Dhillon's Nehru held the opposing bank against the initial assaults, inflicting heavy casualties on the British. Dhillon had been allocated 12 miles of riverbank to defend, however, and his 1,200 men were thinly spread. When the British subjected them to massed tank and artillery fire, their morale first wavered and then broke—240 INA soldiers surrendered, while many others fled into the surrounding jungle. A furious Bose initially reprimanded Dhillon, though the INA leader soon backtracked and promoted the young major to lieutenant colonel for his efforts in what was obviously an impossible situation. The remnants of Dhillon's regiment, about 400 men, defended Taungzin from March 15 to 17, suffering heavy casualties before retreating to Mount Popa.

Mount Popa was defended by Colonel Prem Kumar Sahgal's 2nd Infantry Regiment, 2nd Division, which had the lion's share of the INA's heavy weapons and a small contingent of Japanese troops. On March 30 Captain Mahinder Singh Bagri, in command of a company from the 3rd Battalion, 2nd Infantry, was defending Kabyu, on the northern slopes of Mount Popa, with a Japanese company. The British attacked in battalion strength with armor, and when they appeared to flounder in a minefield, the Japanese commander unwisely ordered a frontal attack. After taking heavy

casualties, the Japanese retreated and were at risk of being routed when Bagri launched a counterattack, hitting the British in the flank and enabling the Japanese to complete their withdrawal. But the British advance was relentless.

The 7th Indian Infantry Division arrived at Mount Popa on April 2 under the cover of an intense aerial bombardment. At noon the following day the British launched an armored assault that quickly overran INA headquarters. Sahgal held fast in the face of desertions and ordered a counterattack after dark. The attack succeeded, but when he attempted to follow it up, he discovered that most of the 1st Battalion, 2nd Infantry, including all the officers, had deserted. Sahgal retreated from Mount Popa, and the rest of the INA's combat history is a narrative of collapse and disintegration punctuated by moments of desperate heroism.

On April 20 the Japanese began to evacuate Rangoon, and Bose decamped for Singapore. The INA surrendered Rangoon to the British on May 4, with Dhillon and his 50 remaining men raising the white flag on May 13. The story of the INA was over—or so it seemed.

Bose was informed of the impending Japanese surrender two days before Emperor Hirohito's broadcast announcement on August 15. Undeterred, he reverted to his original plan—to seek Soviet recognition of his Provisional Government of Free India. He flew from Singapore to Bangkok and on to Saigon. There he found a place on the bomber bound for Tokyo via Dairen in Manchuria. Bose had intended to deplane at Dairen and make his way to Russia. The crash that killed him also marked the end of the INA.

FROM LEFT: THE MAINICHI NEWSPAPERS/AFLO; IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUMS, IND 4851; BETTMANN/CORBIS



Above: Japanese officers surrender their swords to the 25th Indian Division, which had allied with the British. Above right: Lord and Lady Mountbatten greet excited citizens outside the Constituent Assembly of India in August 1947 as the nation readies for the switch to self-rule.

Some 43,000 troops had served in the INA, and the repatriation of those who'd survived the war began in May 1945. Despite the severity of the charges against soldiers who had taken up arms against the empire, the British—not wanting to fuel Indian nationalist feelings in an increasingly volatile political climate—decided to prosecute only INA members who had committed war crimes.

Two factors then conspired to transform the well intentioned, but militarily ineffective INA into a major impetus behind Indian independence. The first was the appearance in cities across India of thousands of uniformed men, a united front of patriotic heroes about whom nothing was previously known. The British refusal to acknowledge the existence of the INA now proved counterproductive, as veterans spun wildly exaggerated tales of its military exploits and achieved legendary status among the population. In August 1945 the wave of approval for the newly discovered INA skyrocketed with the announcement of Bose's "martyrdom" and the arrival from Europe of Indian soldiers in German *Wehrmacht* uniforms. There had, it seemed, been an international crusade to free India during the war.

In November the British made a series of pragmatic but shortsighted decisions regarding the courts-martial of INA war criminals: The first, a joint trial of three officers, was to be held publicly, in Delhi's Red Fort, and concurrent with general elections. The accused happened to be a Hindu, a Muslim and a Sikh (representing three of India's major religions), and they faced either exile or the death penalty if convicted. Two of the defendants, Sahgal (Hindu) and

Dhillon (Sikh) had distinguished themselves in combat, and it was Dhillon's accomplishments under fire that garnered public sentiment rather than the prosecution's accusations that he was a sadist who had tortured POWs.

Found guilty of treason on Dec. 31, 1945, all three were sentenced to deportation for life. In what proved another pragmatic but shortsighted decision, Field Marshal Sir Claude Auchinleck, the British commander in chief in India, remitted the sentences. Intended to quell unrest, his decision was instead taken as an acknowledgment of the officers' innocence.

On Feb. 18, 1946, as further courts-martial got under way, the Royal Indian Navy mutinied. It began in earnest in Bombay and quickly spread to involve 20,000 sailors across dozens of ships and shore establishments. The mutiny had a distinctly nationalist flavor, as sailors aboard ship and ashore hoisted the Indian tricolor, and it spread to other elements of the armed forces and the Indian police. An alarmed British Prime Minister Clement Attlee acknowledged the contributions Bose and the INA had made to Indian nationalism, and the trials ended in May without any executions.

The British government granted India its independence effective Aug. 15, 1947. Shortly before midnight on August 14 Muslim-majority Pakistan was partitioned from British India; shortly after midnight India's Hindu majority took control of its nation. It is hardly surprising that when Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru hoisted the tricolor that day, he did so atop the Lahori Gate of the Red Fort. **MH**

Rafe McGregor, a visiting fellow at the University of Leeds, has published more than 100 magazine articles and reviews, journal papers, short stories and novellas. For further reading he recommends Subhash Chandra Bose: The Springing Tiger, by Hugh Toye, and The Forgotten Army: India's Armed Struggle for Independence, 1942–45, by Peter Ward Fay.

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