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Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia and the role of Indian National Army during World War II

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Abstract

When the world was engaged in its bloodiest war, India was involved in a different kind of conflict: the fight for independence from oppressive foreign rule. India, the mother of civilization and the cradle of humanity, desired independence, and the Second World War provided the opportunity. Outside of India's sovereign territory, freedom fighters formed the Indian National Army and the Provisional Government of Free India and fought against British rule in alliance with Japan, an Axis power. This commentary recounts the emotional and exhilarating chain of events that led to India's eventual independence from British rule during the Second World War. The Indian British Army fought in both Africa and Europe with valour. This paper also provides information about Indian soldiers who fought for their British masters and contributed to the defeat of the Nazis.

Keywords: Indian national army, World War II, Subhash Chandra Bose, Axis Power, Japan, India, Southeast Asia

Introduction

By virtue of the devastation it wrought, World War II is without a doubt the most catastrophic and gloomiest event in human history. Over seventy million casualties serve as a reminder (as humanity cannot afford another such lesson) that wars only bring suffering, death, and destruction. No one person or small group of people should be permitted to run a nation, state, or country, because if this occurs in modern times, an obsessed dictator (always a possibility) could use lethal weapons to wipe out humanity in order to satisfy his desires. Hitler was one such dictator who became the greatest threat to humanity. Although an astute leader, he made irreparable errors that only exacerbated the suffering of his own people; once a mighty nation, Germany was in ruins after the war.

Germany initiated the conflict between the Axis (Germany, Italy, and Japan) and the Allies (United Kingdom, Russia, and the United States). India was possibly the only country in the world to fight on both the Axis and the Allies during World War II. Regular soldiers under British India fought for the British (Allied power), while the Indian National Army, led by Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, fought alongside Japan (Axis power) (Spielvogel, 2016)^[9].

The message of nonviolence championed by Mahatma Gandhi

However, World War II would alter the course of Indian history. When World War II began in 1939, India was under British occupation and its people were fighting for independence. The fight for independence, which began with the Indian Mutiny of 1857, has been ongoing for 75 years, with no sign of victory in sight (Omissi, 2016)^[6]. India remained under British control thanks to Mahatma Gandhi's "non-violence" slogan, and the British did not loosen their grip on India no matter how hard the freedom fighters fought. A saint and mass leader who espoused Ahimsa, Mahatma Gandhi was a firm believer in non-violence. In 1915, when Gandhi returned permanently to India from South Africa, the freedom movement was virtually non-existent. As Gandhi's popularity grew and calls for independence grew louder, the British feared an armed struggle for independence. The British knew that Gandhi's "nonviolence" would keep violent struggle at bay, allowing them to survive in India for a few decades longer (Payne, 2014)^[7]. After the execution of Bhagat Singh, a famous freedom fighter who dared to confront the British head-on, the British were able to remain in power for 20 years due to their Skillful strategizing (Nayar, 2000)^[5]. Bhagat Singh's objective was crystal clear: 300 million Indians could easily oust the remaining 1,000,000 British if they were willing to sacrifice a few lives.

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The British feared that if there were a few more freedom fighters like Bhagat Singh, they would be forced to leave India. Therefore, they desired Gandhi's message of "nonviolence" to reach every corner of the globe. This was the pinnacle of British deceit. ("BBC News | World | The life and death of Mahatma Gandhi," 2021; "Rediff On The NeT Special: Mi Nathuram Boltoy, the transcript," 1998)^[8].

Quit India Movement

So, in 1940, when the world was witnessing its bloodiest war, Gandhi initially agreed to lend moral support to the war, which was fought to combat the Nazi threat. There were tens of thousands of soldiers who primarily served in the British India army to earn a living. Therefore, their participation in the war was an obvious choice. Several members of the Indian National Congress, the largest people's party in India, resigned in protest of the British decision to unilaterally include Indians in the war. Their argument was straightforward: India cannot support a war fought for democratic reasons if India itself is denied democracy.

During their 150-year rule, the British bled India dry. India, which was the richest country in the world prior to the arrival of the British in the 17th century, was rapidly becoming one of the poorest. India, known to the world as the "golden bird" that inspired Christopher Columbus to sail the oceans and discover America instead of actual India, was now engaged in its own struggle for survival. India never required anything from the British on a social, cultural, or economic level, as it already possessed all of these in abundance. Ten thousand years ago, India was the cradle of a civilization that believed in the freedom of people and had never invaded another country. However, this great nation and its people were enslaved and forced to live under a different rule today.

When the British were engaged in a life-and-death conflict with the Germans, Gandhi launched the "Quit India" movement in India. This was the largest movement with unprecedented levels of violence and arrests. This time, after realising the ineffectiveness of nonviolence, Gandhi made it clear that individual acts of violence will not stop the movement. It is crucial to note that a sizable proportion of Indians were content with British rule. In a sense of irony, however, these pleased Indians believed that the British are more capable of managing the country and that India will descend into chaos once it gains independence from the British. Gandhi was no different. Due to his British education, he believed that Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru should be the prime minister once independence is achieved. Once the British relinquished control of India, many Indians wanted Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel, also known as "Iron Man," to become the country's prime minister. However, Gandhi believed that he had the more important task of bringing together over 500 small kingdoms.

The belief that "Britishers are more polished, more articulate, and better educated" was another factor dividing India into pro- and anti-British camps. During British rule, my grandfather Sri Harimohan Ghosh was a school principal. My grandfather used to tell me stories about the positive and negative aspects of British rule when I was young. He used to assert that the British were competent administrators, but that they were depleting India's resources. Pro-British Indians believed that India must aid the British in their life-or-death struggle. This was one of

the reasons why "Quit India" was not yielding immediate, substantial dividends, i.e. independence. Gandhi was among the INC (Indian national congress) members who were arrested. Here, Gandhi's wife Kasturba passed away, and Gandhi himself suffered a near-fatal Malaria attack. Gandhi was released from prison because the British did not want to risk Gandhi's death in prison and incur the nation's wrath.

Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and his role in the freedom struggle

All of this was giving the British a headache, and they were seriously contemplating transferring power to India. Gandhi's Quit India movement kept the nation busy, while a man on the other side of the world plotted the armed overthrow of the British Empire (Getz, 2002)^[3]. Yes, Subhas Chandra Bose was a larger-than-life figure who represented India's only hope at the time. Cambridge-educated, he left the civil service to join the freedom movement and was elected president of the Indian National Congress in 1938. The following year, however, Bose resigned due to significant differences with Gandhi. The British incarcerated Bose. However, he escaped from prison and travelled through Afghanistan to reach Europe. As a Pathan, his journey to Berlin, Germany (Europe) is a story unto itself. Bose was inspiring Indians in India and around the world via radio broadcasts emanating from Berlin ("Home - Archives Online,").

Approximately at the same time, in another part of the world, the British had surrendered nearly 50,000 Indian POWs to the Japanese after losing the war in Singapore to the Japanese. Surprisingly, the Japanese welcomed them and asked them to join their war effort against the British. They assured them of their independence from the British. Under the command of Captain Mohan Singh, approximately 20,000 Indians agreed to serve and soon formed the Indian National Army (INA) (Fay, 1995; "Home - Archives Online,"). Many Indian soldiers, loyal to their British masters, refused to switch sides and were executed in cold blood by the Japanese. Ras Bihari Bose, who was already in Japan, was recruited by the Japanese to lead INA. However, several INA members viewed Ras Bihari Bose with extreme scepticism and refused to accept him as their leader. The Japanese invited Subhas Chandra Bose, who was in Berlin at the time, to lead the Indian National Army (INA). After a brief stay in India, Bose travelled by submarine to Singapore and assumed leadership of the INA. Through an edifying address, he revived the men's and women's enthusiasm (Toye, 2009)^[10]. One of his famous sayings was, "You give me blood, and I will give you freedom." Numerous men and women abandoned their careers to join the INA. Women contributed their jewellery to the war effort. It was truly motivating.

Even women from India joined the INA. India was extremely traditional at the time, so it was extraordinary for women to defy tradition by fighting in the open. The Jhansi ki rani Regiment of the INA consisted of approximately 20 female soldiers.

It is essential to note that many Indians living in Malaya were instrumental in bolstering the INA. Bose also established the Provisional government of Free India, which was quickly recognised internationally. In alliance with Japan, the INA waged war against British India. Historically, they governed portions of north-eastern India and the Andaman and Nicobar islands. However, Subhas

Chandra Bose's government was severely lacking in sovereign territory and remained highly dependent on Japanese troops. Bose's death in a plane crash near Vietnam brought an untimely end to INA. As a precondition of the British handing over power to India, INA soldiers were not inducted into the Indian Army following independence. However, it is uncertain whether India actually implemented this after attaining independence. Ultimately, they were the legitimate freedom fighters and government soldiers (Provisional Government of Free India)

The British India Army Soldier in the British Army fought valiantly for the British in the battle. The Indian Army's fourth and fifth divisions fought in Europe and Africa. Additionally, they defended the Iraqi oil fields. Later, the fifth division was employed as an occupation force in Malaya and to disarm the Japanese in Java. The first time American troops landed on Indian soil, they were primarily involved in noncombat activities, such as transporting supplies from Calcutta and Karachi to Burma and other war zones. Additionally, they helped construct road networks. In their memoirs, Indian soldiers of the British Army describe the extravagant lifestyle of American soldiers. In fact, they earned more than even the British troops.

It is essential to note that India was not involved in a war. The majority of it was occurring along the Burmese and Indian borders in the north-east. Therefore, the majority of Indians (civilians) were not directly affected by the war. However, there were many indirect effects, such as widespread food shortages. This resulted in a famine in 1943 (known as the Great Bengal Famine and caused by the rice disease Brown spot) that killed over three million Indians. It also demonstrates that indirect effects are significantly more severe than direct ones.

India developed an industry to produce war necessities. In the north-eastern state of Assam, the chief minister brought illegally immigrated Bangladeshis to work on the farmlands, but they were all employed to produce items for war (war inputs).

Four thousand gallantry awards and twenty Victoria Crosses were given to Indians. At the age of 85, Umrao Singh was the only living Victoria Cross recipient and received a meagre pension of Rs. 80 per month (RM 6). He passed away in 2005.

The British decision to transfer power to Indian hands.

The discussion of World War II and its impact on India's independence is incomplete without a brief discussion of the aftermath. On August 14, 1947, the British partitioned India into Muslim Pakistan and Secular India, and on August 15, 1947, they declared India's complete independence. Pakistan became an independent nation one day prior. The partition of India was followed by Hindu and Muslim riots that shook the nation. India's very foundation as a religiously tolerant nation was shaken. In 1948, Nathuram Godse, a radical freedom fighter, murdered Mahatma Gandhi. India's life was jolted again by the tragic death of its own founding father. In the meantime, the iron man Deputy Prime Minister Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel was tasked with the most difficult task of integrating hundreds of princely states into the Indian Union. Perhaps India's geographical equations would have been different if not for him. I wonder why he never received India's highest civilian award, the Bharat Ratna, for this.

Conclusions

Few remember that it took so many uprisings to achieve India's independence, despite the fact that several decades have passed since those events. World War II played a crucial role in reducing Britain's control over India. It spawned INA and the Army's rebellion. India was emancipated from foreign rule at last. However, if we examine the post-independence governments of India, few in India recall the sacrifices of these exceptional men and women. India is poorer than it was 200 years ago, although it may be making progress in absolute terms. Before the turn of the 20th century, India was even wealthier than Japan. In relative terms, India has therefore declined.

It is important to note that the INA and the Quit India movement, along with the British's depleted energy due to the war, prompted the British to decide to transfer power to Indian hands. Few other incidents, such as the Royal Indian Navy Mutiny of 1946, caused the British to develop a mistrust of Indian soldiers. British felt that it must first heal its soul, which had been severely damaged by the war. I will continue by stating that Mahatma Gandhi's nonviolent movement was in a sense a failure, as even his 1942 Quit India movement had lost the majority of its strength well before independence. Gandhi presented no danger to the British. However, the British feared another mutiny that they could not afford due to the soldiers' mistrust. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that the cumulative effect of the disobedience movement (Quit India), INA, RIN Mutiny, and the ferment of rebellion among British Indian armed forces' Indian soldiers weakened the British desire to continue.

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