

British Intelligence and Transnational Anti-colonialists: Subhas Chandra Bose and Sir Roger Casement Compared

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Abstract

Using the cases of two prominent anti-colonial activists, India's Subhas Chandra Bose and Ireland's Roger Casement, this article examines how British intelligence monitored separatist activities in the years from 1915 to 1945, particularly by intercepting and decoding the secret communications of other states. The failures of Germany, Italy and Japan to shield their wartime communications from interception and decoding placed both these patriots in mortal jeopardy. These resulted in the capture and execution of Casement, and of unequivocal orders for Bose's assassination. The overall lesson is clear: great powers are no more competent at keeping secrets than are radical movements that look to them for assistance. The article also shows how concerned the British imperial authorities were about both of the possibility of transnational political and practical cooperation between anti-colonial movements and of the potential manipulation of such movements by their geopolitical opponents.

Keywords

Afghanistan, Amazon, Belgium, British intelligence, code-breaking, Congo, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Roger Casement, sexuality, Subhas Chandra Bose.

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Introduction

This article explores how British intelligence agencies exploited the vulnerability of their geopolitical enemies' secret communication to monitor the activities of

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two prominent anti-imperial activists, India's Subhas Chandra Bose (1892–1945) and Ireland's Sir Roger Casement (1864–1916). Each of these patriots left his homeland in efforts to secure the aid of Britain's mortal enemies, and each died in service of his cause.

Casement was hanged in a London prison in August 1916. In 1965, his quick-limed remains were disinterred from his prison grave and returned to Ireland, where they were reburied in a state ceremony.¹ Ever since Casement's death, the matter of his sexuality has remained in dispute. Bose died in agony in a Formosa hospital from burns and other injuries received in an air crash as he attempted to reach the Soviet Union via Northern Manchuria. His body was cremated and the ashes were placed in a Hindu temple in Japan.² A month after his death, Britain's Delhi Intelligence Bureau (DIB) pointed to inconsistencies in accounts of Bose's final journey, hinting at the possibility that the Japanese had disposed of him either because he was now an embarrassment, or because they did not wish him to reach Moscow (the Soviet Union had declared war on Japan the previous week). DIB presciently observed:

Bose's established death would solve the difficult problem of dealing with him. But his "patriotism" and "self-sacrifice" are likely to gain a lasting hold on the nationalist mind, in particular that of the young Bengali. As the politician expressed it, his "legend will continue to inspire the people and steel them in their determination to free India and Asia from Imperialism".³

In May 1946, the DIB director went further, pointing to rumours 'that Subhas Bose was alive in Russia'. He was 'not more than 90% certain that Subhas is dead. He recognizes, of course, the possibility that the Russians are circulating the story for reasons of their own'.⁴ These observations support the conclusion that, despite good intelligence on Bose's activities and his links with India during his final years abroad, British authorities in India were initially as much in the dark about the circumstances of Bose's death as were everyone else. Yet four years earlier, the imperial government in London had ordered his assassination.

As late as 2005, an Indian judicial inquiry cast doubt on the facts and circumstances of Bose's death, without producing any significant new material to support the rumour that he had in fact survived the accident and had eventually

¹ Michael Laffan, 'Sir Roger David Casement', *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, accessed at www.dib.ie/biography/casement-sir-roger-david-a1532, 2 February 2024. Casement was stripped of his knighthood following his conviction for treason, but he is still generally styled 'Sir Roger'.

² On Bose generally, see Leonard A. Gordon, *Brothers Against the Raj: A Biography of Indian Nationalists Sarat & Subhas Chandra Bose* (New York, 1990), and Mihir Bose, *The Lost Leader: A Biography of Subhas Chandra Bose* (London: 1st ed., 1982; Uttar Pradesh, revised, 2004).

³ TNA (The National Archives, London), HS1/200, DIB summary, 17 September 1945.

⁴ British Library, India Office Records (IOR), L/PJ/12/217, IPI to India Office, 2 May 1946. IPI (Indian Political Intelligence) was a small Indian government unit in London which liaised between British intelligence and security agencies and the Delhi authorities on international aspects of Indian revolutionary affairs. For most of its existence it was headed by Irishmen seconded from the Indian police service.

reached Soviet territory. This line was also advanced on occasion by academic commentators, and some ‘delusional Bose followers’ went even further, maintaining that he had become immortal and would one day return to a reunited India.⁵

Roger Casement died long before Bose came to prominence in Indian nationalist politics. Their importance within their respective independence movements is not to be compared. Casement spent most of his adult life as a British official, far removed from popular politics and from the common man. Bose plunged into nationalist protest as soon as he left university and rose to become one of the three key figures in the Indian National Congress movement before he broke from it in 1939. Nevertheless, there are significant parallels between the two men’s experiences as nationalist revolutionaries. This was so in terms of their anti-colonialism, the paths they took to secure their countries’ freedom from British rule and the means by which British imperial authorities watched and attempted to thwart them. There are also continuing controversies surrounding aspects of their personal lives. In addition, Casement, more than other key figures in the Irish revolutionary movement such as Michael Collins or Eamon de Valera, addressed the Irish question within a broader framework of anti-colonialism and recognized assertions of racial superiority—and inferiority—as a key aspect of British colonial rule.⁶

Both men saw British colonialism as a form of government which brutalized, extorted and demoralized subject peoples. Each came to believe that only through armed struggle could independence be achieved. Each looked to Britain’s principal geopolitical enemies for support. Casement favoured imperial Germany. Bose approached Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, imperial Japan and the Soviet Union. Each travelled to Germany to seek military and political support. Each was betrayed by a trusted travelling companion. Each sought to persuade fellow countrymen who were prisoners of war to fight alongside their captors for national freedom. Each eventually left Germany disappointed, secretly by submarine. And the plans and movements of each became visible to their British enemy, due to the vulnerable code and cipher systems of the great powers whom they entrusted with their lives.⁷

Roger Casement’s capture, conviction for treason and execution in 1916 were directly attributable to the fact that British intelligence intercepted and decoded diplomatic cable traffic between Berlin and the German embassy in Washington, DC, in the United States. This disclosed information about plans for Irish rebellion and for Casement’s return in advance of the uprising.

⁵ Mihir Bose, *Silver: The Spy Who Fooled The Nazis* (London: Fonthill Media, 2016), 299; Privadarsi Mukherji, *Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose: Contemporary Anecdotes, Reminiscences and Wartime Reportage* (New Delhi: Har-Anand Publishers, 2009), 353.

⁶ On this see especially Seamus Ó Siócháin, *Roger Casement: Imperialist, Rebel, Revolutionary* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2013).

⁷ For simplicity, the colloquial terms ‘code’ and ‘decode’ are used throughout in respect both of codes and of ciphers used in communications intercepted by the British. Note also that the date of despatch of each communication cited is used, unless there was a very significant delay between interception and decoding.

Similarly, it was through decoded Italian diplomatic reports from Kabul in February 1941 that the British discovered Bose's presence in Afghanistan and his intention to travel to Moscow to seek Soviet support for Indian independence. This information led to the remarkable decision to have him assassinated en route. Because the British were able to intercept and decode key Italian, Japanese and—from December 1942—German diplomatic communications, they continued to monitor Bose's activities and plans. British codebreakers were also able to keep some track of the activities of Bose's trusted aide Bhagat Ram Talwar, who had helped him escape from Calcutta to Kabul in January 1941. Bhagat Ram remained the key link between Bose and his Indian followers throughout the war. He also operated as a Soviet, Italian, German, Japanese and British agent, a bewildering portfolio of conflicting obligations which he managed with consummate skill.⁸

Indo-Irish Anti-colonial Solidarity

The discussion which follows is situated within the wider framework of Indo-Irish radical anti-colonial connections which flourished during and following the First World War, as delineated particularly by Kate O'Malley in *Ireland, India and Empire*. She documented the strong and enduring bonds of sympathy and respect which developed between the leading lights of the Indian and the Irish separatist movements on the basis of a shared anti-colonialism. She also argued that 'the full impact of Ireland as an influence' on Bose 'has ... been severely underestimated'.⁹

The British authorities considered Indo-Irish revolutionary connections a very serious threat to the internal cohesion of the British Empire. If Irish separatists could successfully use force to secure independence where peaceful methods had repeatedly failed, might not other subject territories and peoples do the same? Furthermore, there was a danger that such movements would attempt to help each other in practical terms as well as in expressions of mutual support. In the United States, Irish spokesmen and members of the Ghadar movement shared public platforms, where they made common cause against British colonialism generally. In 1919 key Irish rebel organizer Liam Mellows joined Indian revolutionary Lajpat Rai at a public meeting of the 'Friends of Indian Freedom', founded on the model of the American 'Friends of Irish Freedom', while Eamon de Valera's trusted subordinate Harry Boland 'collaborated with anti-colonialist lobbies such as the Indian Friends of Freedom'.¹⁰

Such interactions gave the British imperial authorities acute unease, and considerable effort was devoted to analysing them. Much of Britain's information on both Irish and Indian conspiracy in the United States came from conventional counter-espionage operations, including the use of informers, observation of Irish

⁸ Bose, *Silver*.

⁹ Kate O'Malley, *Ireland, India and Empire: Indo-Irish Radical Connections, 1919–64* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 181.

¹⁰ C. D. Greaves, *Liam Mellows and the Irish Revolution* ((London: Lawrence & Wishart), 149, 205 and 259; David Fitzpatrick, *Harry Boland's Irish Revolution* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2003), 138.

and Indian émigré organizations and liaison with various American law enforcement agencies. Between 1915 and 1917, these efforts were augmented by a most secret source: decoded cable traffic between Berlin and the German embassy in the United States, which disclosed additional aspects of German encouragement for Irish and Indian revolutionaries.¹¹

When the Irish revolutionary assembly Dáil Eireann debated whether to ratify the arduously negotiated Anglo-Irish Treaty of 6 December 1921, politicians on both sides of that argument maintained that Ireland had set an important example for Egypt and India to follow.¹² Yet it must be stressed that Indo-Irish radical links were primarily of symbolic rather than practical consequence. It is important to recognize the limits as well as the strength of fraternal Indo-Irish anti-colonial links. That point is well illustrated by the 1920 Connaught Rangers mutiny in Punjab when a battalion of Irish soldiers downed arms in protest at British repression in Ireland. These mutineers demonstrated no sympathy whatsoever for the Indian independence movement, and in their interactions with the Indian public exemplified rather than contested the inherent racism of the Raj. In 1921–22, while the Irish revolutionaries were still negotiating the terms of independence with the British government, the Leinster Regiment, another unit composed mainly of men from rural Irish nationalist communities, played a leading role in the brutal suppression of the Malabar or Mappilah rebellion in southern India, an outbreak which had clear anti-colonial as well as intercommunal aspects.¹³

The example of the celebrated Irish freedom fighter Dan Breen further illustrates the limits of Indo-Irish revolutionary solidarity. His memoir, *My Fight for Irish Freedom*, is said to have inspired the group which staged the 1930 Chittagong Armoury Raid.¹⁴ In 1949, he mused that, while ‘fairly well known all over Ireland and parts of Europe ... I am I feel better known in India & the East’.¹⁵ In 1965, journalist Chaman Lal Azad, a veteran independence activist, told Breen of his hope ‘that you live long and continue to inspire millions of people who are still bound down by the rapacious imperialist rulers with the chains of slavery ... We were mainly inspired by Ireland’s example’. Breen’s book had ‘inspired us most’. It ‘instilled so much self confidence and sacrifice that many a young man left their hearths and homes’ to join the revolutionary movement. Chaman Lal stated that ‘amongst us the names of four Irish revolutionary leaders have always been popular ... De Valera, Michael Collins, Arthur Griffith and Dan Breen ... we still

¹¹ Paul McMahon, *British Spies and Irish Rebels: British Intelligence and Ireland, 1916–1945* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2008), 19–20.

¹² See the full text of the debates at <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/visit-and-learn/centenaries/treaty-debates/explore-the-treaty-debates/>, accessed 14 March 2024.

¹³ Darragh Gannon, ‘Ireland, India and the Anti-Imperial World of the Connaught Rangers Mutiny’, and Eunan O’Halpin, ‘The Connaught Rangers Mutiny in its Wider Context’, in *Ireland, India and Anti-Imperial Struggle: Remembering the Connaught Rangers Mutiny, 1920*, ed. Jyoti Atwal and Eunan O’Halpin (Delhi: Aakar Books, 2021), 32–47 and 61–62.

¹⁴ O’Malley, *Ireland, India and Empire*, 94–95.

¹⁵ Georgetown University Library, John Monagan papers, Folder 4, box 1, Breen to Monagan, 24 September 1948, and box 20, Folder 1, Breen to Monagan, 22 April 1962.

remember those gallant patriots who were once embodiments of terror to the alien oppressors of your proud country'. He appended a publicity sheet for a forthcoming compendium of writings on the 'martyrs and leading revolutionaries of India', carrying images of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association radicals Bhagat Singh and Batukeswar Dutt.¹⁶

Breen undoubtedly took a keen interest in India's independence struggle, seeing it as a further blow to Britain's imperial interests. He possessed an autographed copy of Jawaharlal Nehru's *An Autobiography*. He admired Mahatma Gandhi, although he faulted him for his pacificism, and termed him 'a crook' because of his acceptance of India's British-imposed partition.¹⁷ Yet Breen also mourned Adolf Hitler, who he believed had saved Western Europe from Communism by attacking the Soviet Union: 'I fear the Reds not for myself but for the world'. Breen, undoubtedly influenced by Nazi propaganda, thought in stark racist terms. He deplored America's involvement in the war against Germany, blaming Roosevelt's 'Jewish & Masonic friends ... He will go down in history as the white man's grave digger'. Winston Churchill 'is Masonic and half-Yank. Maybe he has Jewish & coloured blood'. If Breen is any guide, racism and anti-colonialism were not mutually exclusive perspectives.¹⁸

Anti-colonial Rebels Compared: Casement and Bose

Roger Casement (1864–1916) became a separatist revolutionary by a circuitous route. Born and raised in Ireland, he initially trained as a shipping clerk in Britain. After working for some years in Africa for British commercial interests, he was recruited to British government service, initially as a surveyor working for the Niger Coast Protectorate in West Africa. In 1894 he completed a series of explorations deep into the interior of the Niger Delta region intended to pave the way for the extension of British regional control. He was impressed by his contact with independent indigenous peoples, arguing for a gradualist approach to the development of trade networks which would not 'destroy the cultural fabric of African societies'. These early explorations may have planted the first seeds of his anti-colonialism, although Margaret O'Callaghan points to his youthful poetry offering critiques of the 'violence at the heart of the consolidation of English power in Ireland at the expense of Gaelic Ireland' in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹⁹

¹⁶ Mellifont Abbey Archives, Brother Columcille papers, Chaman Lal Azad to Dan Breen, 7 October 1965.

¹⁷ Jawaharlal Nehru, *An Autobiography* (London: 1st edition, The Bodley Head, 1936). Breen gave this copy to his 3rd Tipperary Brigade IRA comrade James Moloney (1896–1981), this writer's grandfather—it is now in the Linen Hall Library, Belfast; Georgetown University Library, John Monagan papers, Folder 30, box 1, Breen to Monagan, 2 September 1965.

¹⁸ Mellifont Abbey Archives, Dan Breen journal, 1 October 1944.

¹⁹ Robert Burroughs, 'Imperial Eyes or "The Eyes of Another Race"?': Roger Casement's Travels in West Africa', *The Journal of Commonwealth and Imperial History* 37, no. 3 (2009): 386–87; Margaret O'Callaghan, 'Casement, Colonialism and a Remembered Past', in *Ireland in Transition, 1867–1921*, ed. D.G. Boyce and Alan O'Day (Routledge, 2004), 169.

Casement was recruited to the British consular service in 1895. While stationed in the Congo in 1903, he was instructed to investigate stories of barbaric treatment of Congolese by officials and overseers working for King Leopold of the Belgians, who had claimed the territory as a personal fiefdom. Casement's thorough and damning report describing the forced labour, mutilation and murder of people treated effectively as slaves was published by the British government in 1904. Most unusually for a lowly consular official, he was awarded a high honour for his disclosures, which also earned him much public praise from anti-slavery campaigners. Over time, Casement came to view British rule in Ireland explicitly through the prism of the brutal European colonialism which he had encountered and documented in Africa. He also became an avid participant in the Irish cultural revival. On return to government service following a period of extended leave, he was transferred to South America. As Consul General in Sao Paulo, Brazil, he was tasked in 1910 to investigate the working conditions of British Caribbean migrant labourers employed in rubber extraction in the remote Upper Amazon. He produced a damning report, a catalogue of horrors akin to what he had found in the Congo. Lauded once more for his humanitarian work, he received a knighthood. By now, however, he was completely disenchanted with British colonial rule. He took early retirement from government service in 1913, on a handsome pension, and became a passionate advocate of Irish independence.²⁰ Casement was from an Ulster Protestant background, and he acknowledged the problem that Irish Protestants and unionists feared that the self-government demanded by nationalists would lead to majoritarian 'Rome rule' by a Catholic majority. He had no easy solution to that issue. Very similar religio-political divisions were to complicate the Indian drive for self-determination and, as in Ireland, to result in British-imposed partition. While awaiting trial for treason in 1916, Casement eventually decided to convert to Catholicism. This concerned the British Catholic prelate Cardinal Bourne, who had 'information on the highest authority that his moral life had been deplorable', and who sought 'proof of the sincerity and valid grounds of his wish to become a Catholic. Bourne also noted that Casement had 'played a traitor's part' and had 'accepted Knighthood at the King's hands' when it suited him.²¹

In 1914, a few weeks before the outbreak of the First World War, Casement left Ireland for the United States. He hoped to plan an Irish rebellion in conjunction with Clan na Gael, an Irish émigré secret society rather akin to the newly formed Indian Ghadar revolutionary party. His humanitarian achievements were well known in American progressive circles, although his 'amateurism and eccentricities' worried many admirers.²² In a memorandum which he submitted to the German embassy in Washington, DC, he argued that Ireland's case for freedom was not an isolated one: Egypt and India should equally be supported in their

²⁰ Casement's pension papers are in TNA, T1/11681/23016. In the autumn of 1914, the Treasury concluded that, despite his treasonable conduct, they only had the power to suspend, not to cancel, his £600 yearly pension.

²¹ Westminster Diocesan Archives, Box B5/36, undated 'Memorandum re Roger Casement'.

²² Alan J. Ward, *Ireland and Anglo-American Relations 1899–1921* (Dublin/London: Wiedenfeld and Nicholson, 1969), 75 and 77.

struggles against British rule. German diplomats encouraged plans for an Irish rebellion. In November 1914, Casement travelled to Germany in hopes of securing practical military support. When his ship docked at Christiana (Oslo) in Norway, his travelling companion, a young Norwegian-American bisexual whom he had first met on an earlier visit to New York, contacted the British legation in an attempt to betray him.²³ As shall be seen, there are parallels here in the way in which Subhas Chandra Bose was systematically betrayed by his most trusted aide between 1941 and 1945, albeit always in furtherance of the wishes of Bhagat Ram's Soviet masters rather than for financial reasons.

When Casement reached Germany, he tried to establish an 'Irish Brigade' composed of Irish soldiers captured while serving in the British army. These would fight alongside Germany to free Ireland. This project proved a miserable failure. He was little known in Ireland itself and had nothing in common with ordinary Irishmen. Casement's own lawyer later observed that 'these men had probably never heard of him at home, and were wary of the man'. Fewer than sixty agreed to join, many of whom were attracted as much by the improved living conditions Casement offered as by patriotic fervour. One of them, Harry Quinlisk, was later unmasked and killed as a British spy during the Irish War of Independence.²⁴ A German historian observed that, despite his knowledge of international affairs, Casement 'lacked the robustness needed' to operate effectively in Germany. In April 1916, frustrated by German unwillingness to provide direct military support for the planned Irish rebellion, Casement returned to Ireland by submarine. British intelligence knew in advance of the planned rebellion because they were able to intercept, decode and read German diplomatic traffic between Washington, DC, and Berlin. The Irish police were on the lookout for a party expected to make a clandestine landing on the south-west coast, and Casement was captured on Banna Strand in County Kerry within a few hours of coming ashore. A disguised German trawler carrying twenty thousand rifles and ammunition was also intercepted by the Royal Navy, though the crew managed to scuttle the craft while under escort into Cork Harbour. Casement had apparently hoped to persuade his fellow revolutionaries to postpone the outbreak because Germany would give no direct military help. His British captors refused to let him issue a statement on those lines, evidently preferring that a rebellion take place which could be decisively crushed.²⁵

Amidst considerable confusion, the rebellion which Casement had hoped to see postponed went ahead, although a day later than planned. A dismal military failure, the 'Easter Rising' nevertheless transformed Irish nationalist politics and caught the imagination of anti-colonial movements across the British Empire, though it had no impact upon the many thousands of Irish nationalists in British

²³ McMahon, *British Spies & Irish Rebels*, 19–20 and 111; Lucy MacDiarmid, 'Casement, New York and the Easter Rising', in *Ireland's Allies: America and the Easter Rising*, ed. Miram Nyhan Grey (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2016), 102–3.

²⁴ Military Archives of Ireland, Bureau of Military History, WS 381 (Charles Gavan Duffy, 16 April 1950), 15; McMahon, *British Spies & Irish Rebels*, 111; Eunan O'Hallpin and Daithí Ó'Corráin, *The Dead of the Irish Revolution* (London: Yale University Press, 2020), 121.

²⁵ Reinhard Doerries, *Prelude to the Easter Rising: Sir Roger Casement in Imperial Germany* (London: Frank Cass, 2005), 9–25.

military service.²⁶ Casement, convicted of treason in a trial in London, was executed in August 1916. In order to discourage calls for a reprieve because of his remarkable pre-war humanitarian achievements, British intelligence officials privately showed the United States ambassador in London and influential Casement sympathizers some extracts from what they claimed were secret diaries in which Casement had recorded homosexual encounters in the Congo and in the Amazon region. The lengthy 1903, 1910 and 1911 so-called ‘Black Diaries’ from which the extracts came were afterwards denounced as forgeries, although Casement’s own trial lawyer decades later controversially asserted his client’s pride in his homosexuality.²⁷ The British authorities withheld the diaries for many years. They were eventually opened to research, but this did not settle the matter despite overwhelming physical evidence of their authenticity in terms of the content, the handwriting and the origins and condition of the paper and ink.²⁸

For most Irish people of the revolutionary generation, homosexuality was considered a grave, unnatural perversion. That the British had secretly spread this slur after Casement’s capture convinced many that it was simply a wicked lie. But there remained unease about the matter. As late as 1964, Erskine Childers, then the Minister for Transport and Power, persuaded American writer Helen Landreth not to publish all of his mother Molly Childers’ recollections of Casement. This was because Molly’s comments included ‘one statement which people who did not know Casement might misunderstand’.²⁹ She had written that, while ‘I liked him and his intense love for Ireland’, Casement

was crazy – poor creature ... I have watched him more than once having a mental Convulsion. Yelling and screaming and tearin[g] up and down the room. The result of the terrible, nearly killing sun-stroke he had had ... The truth is hard to find but I never saw any sign of that failing [homosexuality] in him. His mental condition was clearly known by the Germans and ruined any help they would give Ireland.

Landreth duly excised this material and also told Erskine Childers that she had destroyed the original letter. However, a photocopy of it remains in her papers.³⁰

²⁶ Charles Townshend, *Easter 1916: the Irish Rebellion* (London: Penguin, 2005) provides an exceptionally clear overview of the Rising.

²⁷ Walter J. Maloney, *The Forged Casement Diaries* (Dublin: The Talbot Press, 1936). On the careful planning of Maloney’s work by a small cabal, see especially W. J. McCormack, *Roger Casement in Death: Or Haunting the Free State* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2002). See also Eunan O’Halpin, ‘Science No Deterrent For True Believers’, *The Irish Times*, 12 October 2002, accessed at <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/science-no-deterrent-for-true-believers-1.1099155>, 3 February 2024; Frank Callinan, ‘Sullivan, Alexander Martin’, *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, www.dib.ie/biography/sullivan-alexander-martin-a8377, accessed 5 February 2024.

²⁸ The Casement controversy is very fairly set out in an essay by Kevin Grant, *The Guardian*, 28 September 2016, consulted at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/sep/28/roger-casement-gay-irish-martyr-or-victim-of-a-british-forgery>, 3 February 2024, and in McCormack, *Roger Casement in Death*.

²⁹ Boston College, Burns Library, Helen Landreth papers, Boxes 1/20 and 2/5, Erskine Childers to Landreth, 1 September 1964, and Landreth to Erskine Childers, 16 December 1970.

³⁰ Boston College, Burns Library, Helen Landreth papers, Boxes 1/22 and 2/5, Molly Childers to Landreth, 26 June 1963, and Landreth to Erskine Childers, 16 December 1970; Helen Landreth, *The*

In contemporary Ireland, various public figures, including Leo Varadkar (*Taoiseach* or prime minister from 2017 to 2020 and from 2022 to 2024) are openly gay, and same-sex marriage is a constitutional right. Yet Casement's sexuality remains a problem because the 'black diaries' if authentic, indicate that, while an outstanding humanitarian, he was particularly attracted to youths of colour and may have exploited them for sexual ends. Many devout Irish Republicans still support the forgery claims. Debate on the issue is also politicized in respect of Irish partition. In Northern Ireland, one of the most coherent proponents of the argument that Casement was homosexual, with a particular interest in youths, is himself a courageous gay and human rights activist. He is also a politician firmly opposed to the united Ireland to which Casement aspired.³¹

Casement's recourse to imperial Germany for assistance in throwing off the chains of British rule required him to set aside his abhorrence of European colonial rule generally. His years in Africa had exposed him to the evils not only of the British but also of the Belgian, French, Portuguese and German colonial misrule. He was well aware of Germany's particularly atrocious record in South-west Africa, which culminated in the Herero and Nama genocide of 1904 to 1908. But all nationalist movements, however noble their stated aims, also follow the maxim 'My enemy's enemy is my friend'. In this, Casement's decision to seek German aid to secure Irish independence is similar to that of Subhas Chandra Bose, who, in turning to the Axis powers, faced the same paradox.

There are further parallels between Casement's revolutionary career and that of Subhas Chandra Bose. From a prosperous family, Bose was educated for a career as a senior official in British-administered India. His academic formation was capped by a year in Cambridge University in England in 1920–21, which coincided with the most violent phase of the Irish independence struggle. Bose was aware that the Irish recourse to political violence had come only after a succession of British governments had failed to honour pledges to grant limited self-government, or 'Home Rule', to Ireland. This object lesson in the hollowness of British promises probably influenced Bose's dismissive attitude towards the limited essays in reform of Indian self-government which India experienced from 1919 onwards: Britain would always offer far more than she would deliver, on a schedule of her choosing, and she would invariably place her imperial interests above those of India.

Bose, educated to become a servant of the empire, instead committed himself to the cause of Indian independence. Soon recognized as a key figure, he frequently fell foul of the law for acts of political disobedience. He was imprisoned in Burma for political offences from 1925 to 1927, where he developed tuberculosis, and again in 1929–30, after which he was elected mayor of Calcutta. From 1933 to 1936, under watchful British eyes, he travelled in Europe, rebuilding his

Mind and Heart of Molly Childers: As Shown in Selections from a Personal Correspondence with Helen Landreth (Chestnut Hill: privately published, 1965).

³¹ Jeffrey Dudgeon, *Roger Casement: The Black Diaries – With a Study of His Background, Sexuality, and Irish Political Life* (Belfast: Belfast Press, 2016).

health and developing contacts with political movements of both right and left to further the cause of Indian independence. He hailed the achievements of Fascism in Italy, where he met Mussolini in January 1935, and was enthusiastic about aspects of Nazism, yet above all he admired the Soviet Union. The heterogeneity of his political tastes is easily explained: he saw all these powers and ideologies as enemies of British imperialism, rather than as direct exemplars for a free India. The immediate results of his advocacy of India's cause were disappointing. He told an Irish diplomat, during one of several visits to the Irish Legation in Berlin, that he believed Germany would 'take no interest' in the issue of Indian independence.³² In February 1936 he visited Ireland, where he was very warmly welcomed by head of government Eamon de Valera, recognized internationally as the surviving embodiment of the Irish independence struggle. Bose also visited Dáil Éireann and had meetings with the leaders of the other major political parties as well as with sympathetic radical organizations, including the small Irish League for Indian Independence.³³ The Irish in turn did not lose their regard for him. This was so even after he made a spurious and embarrassing claim in 1943 that the Dublin government had recognized his newly established Indian government in exile. His brother Sarat was very cordially received by de Valera and other prominent figures of the independence era when he visited Ireland in 1948. Other Indian political activists were similarly made welcome, both before and after the achievement of independence for India and Pakistan.³⁴

On his return to India from Europe in 1936, Bose resumed his political activism, resulting in further imprisonment. During his years abroad he had developed a broadly socialist analysis of India's economic and social problems. In 1938 he was elected president of the Indian Nationalist Congress despite tensions between him and Mahatma Gandhi. As president, he made what the late Jaswanth Singh (1938–2020), a former BJP cabinet minister for defence, external affairs and finance, commended as a 'solo run' to achieve a constructive resolution of the difficult question of recognizing the right of the Muslim League to speak for Indian Muslims generally. This initiative reflected Bose's enduring dislike of divisive Hindu/Muslim communal politics.³⁵ Frozen out of leadership early in 1939, Bose formed the All-India Forward Bloc as 'an organized and disciplined Left Wing

³² O'Malley, *Ireland, India and Empire*, 95; Irish Minister in Berlin to Dublin, 22 January 1936, www.difp.ie (consulted 1 March 2024).

³³ Gordon, *Brothers Against the Empire*, 303–6; Boston College, Burns Library, Loretta Clarke Murray papers, Box 4/45, minutes of Irish Indian Independence League executive, 24 February 1936; *Irish Independent*, 6 and 10 February 1936.

³⁴ S. K. Bose, *A Centenary Offering: Remembering My Father Sarat Chandra Bose 1889–1989* (Calcutta: Netaji Research Bureau, 1988), 163; Eunan O'Halpin, *Spying on Ireland: British Intelligence and Irish Neutrality during the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 234; Cambridge Centre for South Asian Studies, Oral History Transcript 210d (B. Chaman Lal), 85, and 210b (B. Chaman Lal), 38–41. I am grateful to Professor Sucheta Mahajan for guiding me to this important collection.

³⁵ Jaswanth Singh, *Jinnah: India – Partition and Independence* (New Delhi: Rupa Paperback, 2010), 247; M. R. Kazimi (ed.), *Jinnah: Views & Reviews* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 219.

Party in the Congress'.³⁶ He argued that 'a national struggle for independence' would be necessary to expel the British.³⁷ The Forward Bloc was to become a significant element in the Indian revolutionary underground after Bose left India in 1941. However, that movement was heavily hampered by official repression, by Communist Party hostility after Germany attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941, and by betrayal from within.

In Germany, Subhas Chandra Bose's Austrian secretary, Emelié Schenkl, bore him a daughter, born just months before he left Germany for good in February 1943.³⁸ The Bose family welcomed their new relatives as early as 1948, when Sarat visited them in Vienna.³⁹ Yet some in India still cling to the fantasy that a man so committed to the cause of independence as Subhas Chandra Bose would never have forsaken chastity while India remained unfree. His daughter Anita has deprecated attempts to appropriate her father's story for contemporary political ends: as recently as 2023, she observed that his memory was being exploited for divisive purposes 'poles apart from' his aspirations for a pluralist, secular India.⁴⁰

British Eyes on Bose, 1939–41

British surveillance of Bose was facilitated by access to Japanese and Chinese consular telegrams from Calcutta. Knowledge of this decoded traffic was restricted to a very small number of policy-makers and intelligence officials. Because such material was systematically 'weeded' from policy records before their release, it is often impossible to ascertain exactly what impact these decodes had on decision-makers. We can, however, be confident that such material was considered a valuable source.

Japan had provided a sympathetic refuge since 1915 for one prominent early Indian independence fighter, Rash Behari Bose (1886–1945). However, the brutal conduct of her forces in China from 1937 onwards was generally viewed with horror by Subhas Chandra Bose and other Indian independence leaders.⁴¹ In early 1939, nevertheless, the Japanese Consul General in Calcutta highlighted Bose's sympathetic participation in a conference on Japanese/Indian understanding. That autumn the Chinese consul in Calcutta expressed concern about Bose, who had said he wished to visit China to organize medical assistance for civilians. The consul was worried because Bose belonged to 'the extreme Left Wing of the Party

³⁶ John Darwin, 'A Third British Empire? The Dominion Idea in Imperial Politics', in *The Oxford History of the British Empire Vol. IV: The Twentieth Century*, ed. Judith Brown and Wm. Roger Louis (Oxford, 1999), 81–83; Subhas Chandra Bose, *The Indian Struggle 1920–1942* (Calcutta: Asia Publishing House, 1964), 342.

³⁷ Bose, *Centenary Offering*, 91–92.

³⁸ Prime Minister's Memorial Museum and Library, Oral History Transcripts Acc. 179 (Madame Emelié Schenkl, 5 October 1972), and Acc. 498 (Dr Asoke Nath Bose, 12 December 1987), 25–26; Bose, *Centenary Offering*, 158.

³⁹ Gordon, *Brothers Against The Raj*, 596.

⁴⁰ *Hindustan Times*, 21 January 2023, and *Times of India*, 24 January 2023.

⁴¹ Gordon, *Brothers Against the Raj*, 371; Mihir Bose, *The Lost Hero*, 348–49.

... his real reason for proceeding ... is to escape surveillance ... as a consequence of the European war'. In fact, however, such a medical mission was established.⁴²

Bose anticipated that once a European war involving Britain broke out, the Delhi authorities would act against him. He later recorded his 'surprise' that Delhi had tolerated his 'anti-British and anti-war propaganda' for as long as they did.⁴³ In the early summer of 1940, two Sikh communists agreed to take him to Moscow. A British intelligence file recorded that Bose intended 'to persuade Stalin to occupy India', but he did not travel. Bose was eventually detained in July 1940 for involvement in a carefully planned illegal demonstration, uniting Hindu and Muslim activists, demanding the removal of Calcutta's hated Holwell monument. In prison, Bose went on a hunger strike, threatening his already delicate health. He was released into house arrest in December.⁴⁴

In late January 1941, a senior police officer, acting on a tip-off from 'a daily visitor' to the Bose household, advised that Bose had 'recovered sufficiently to be able to return to jail'.⁴⁵ In fact, Bose had already escaped on 17 January. Travelling in disguise by car and train via Delhi to Peshawar, and thereafter on foot, he was accompanied on his arduous journey into Afghanistan by an intrepid communist from the Punjab, Bhagat Ram, who was also a Soviet agent (a fact which, along with his later cooperation with the British, he concealed from the Bose family until the appearance of Czech historian Milan Hauner's groundbreaking study *India in Axis Strategy* in 1981).⁴⁶ They reached Kabul, where Bose eventually secured the aid of Italian, German and Soviet diplomats for his scheme to reach Moscow.⁴⁷ He appears not to have tried to contact the Japanese legation. The Japanese minister in Kabul had already advised that Afghanistan was the 'pivotal point' for Axis activities against India, and Japanese diplomats were using Kabul to collect intelligence on the southern Soviet Union, on western China and on British India.⁴⁸

In Kabul, Bose and Bhagat Ram first approached the Soviet ambassador, who suspected a British provocation and would not deal with him. They then tried the

⁴² TNA, HW12/244, Chinese consul, Calcutta to Foreign Office, Chunking, 23 October 1939; Chitra Ghosh, *Opening the Closed Windows: The Role of Women in Indian Society – The Reality and Ideal as Envisaged by Subhas Chandra Bose* (Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 2002), 213.

⁴³ Bose, *Indian Struggle*, 340.

⁴⁴ British Library, IOR, IPI to India Office, 17 December 1941, summarizing a statement made by Acchar Singh Cheena after his arrest in August 1941. Cheena claimed that some party comrades in the Punjab were suspicious of Bose and did not want to help him; Bose, *Lost Hero*, 422–28.

⁴⁵ British Library, IOR, R/3/2/18, surveillance report on Bose, 23 January 1941, and accompanying minute by Deputy Inspector General of Police Ray.

⁴⁶ Milan Hauner, *India in Axis Strategy: Germany, Japan and Indian Nationalists in the Second World War* (Stuttgart: Klepp-Kotta, 1981).

⁴⁷ British Library, IOR, L/PJ/12/218, IPI memorandum on Bose sent to India Office, 17 December 1941.

⁴⁸ TNA, WO208/3812, 'Extract from Survey No. 4 of the Activities of Foreigners in India', 25 January 1941, and HW12/255, Japanese minister, Kabul to Tokyo, 11 July 1940. The larger powers typically appointed a 'Minister Plenipotentiary', lower in rank than an ambassador to small states.

Axis ministers. The Italian minister Quaroni, who was already involved in schemes to finance tribal unrest along the Afghan/Indian frontier, to spread propaganda amongst Indian Muslims, and to gather intelligence on India generally, took the lead.⁴⁹ After consultations between Rome and Berlin, the Italian and German ambassadors to the Soviet Union secured Soviet permission for Bose to travel to Berlin via Moscow.⁵⁰ Quaroni provided Bose with papers identifying him as a junior Italian legation official. Bose crossed the Afghan/Soviet border on 18 March and made the long journey to Moscow, arriving there on 31 March.⁵¹ The Soviet authorities treated him 'like a visiting dignitary', but there were no substantive discussions. Instead, after a brief visit to the German embassy, he departed for Berlin by train. This was just twelve weeks before geopolitics were upended by Hitler's sudden attack on the Soviet Union.⁵²

The Soviets, possibly suspicious that Bose had been 'furtively flirting with Japan', probably tolerated Bose's departure from Moscow to Berlin because Bhagat Ram was their trusted agent. He and another informant had already won the confidence of the Germans in Kabul and were supplying them systematically with Soviet-approved misinformation.⁵³ Bhagat Ram's reports to Soviet intelligence officers in Kabul enabled them to observe Bose's links with his homeland, to watch German and Italian intrigues against British India, and to monitor German efforts to destabilize the Soviet Union's southern frontier regions through émigré groups who had settled in Afghanistan after fleeing from Soviet oppression in the 1920s.⁵⁴

The British authorities in Delhi were at first completely baffled by Bose's escape. Initially, they believed he had 'sailed for the Far East bearded and carrying a false passport'. On 18 March, ironically on the very day that Bose crossed Afghanistan's northern frontier into the Soviet Union, the British legation in Kabul reported that Bose's presence in Kabul had now become widely known, as were his contacts with the Axis missions. The legation awaited further instructions. Relations with the Afghan government were at a low ebb, and little action on Bose could have been expected: the long-serving British minister in Kabul complained that the 'Afghans are being very foolish.. and run the risk of

⁴⁹ TNA, HW12/260 and 262, Quaroni (in Kabul) to Rome, 27 December 1940, and 25 and 26 February 1941.

⁵⁰ Woermann (Berlin) to German ambassador, Moscow, 9 February 1941, *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918–1945. Series D 1937–1945* [DGFP], Vol. XII, 63–64. On 3 March the Italian ambassador in Moscow confirmed Soviet assent. TNA, HW12/262, Rome to Quaroni, 28 February 1941.

⁵¹ S. K. Bose, *The Great Escape* (Calcutta: Netaji Research Bureau, 1975; 3rd ed., 2000), 55, carries a facsimile of German ambassador, Moscow, to Berlin, 31 March 1941, reporting Bose's arrival.

⁵² TNA, HW12/291, Quaroni to Rome, 24 July 1943; Bose, *Lost Leader*, 451–54, has a digest of Quaroni to Rome, 2 April 1941, reporting his discussions with Bose. This could not be traced in the HW12 series (note that, for whatever reason, not all diplomatic decodes were stored in this series).

⁵³ IPI to India Office, 17 December 1941, as in note 42 above, indicates that by the summer of 1940 Moscow was sceptical of Bose's ideological bona fides.

⁵⁴ TNA, HS1/191, undated diagram [April 1943] of German subversive scheme working up from northern Afghanistan to Tashkent, and Pilditch (DIB) to SOE, 13 December 1944.

alienating us in their anxiety to keep in with Germany. They are trying to run with the hare and hunt with the hound, and are making a mess of it'.⁵⁵ But the key decision about how to deal with Bose was taken in London, without any reference either to the Kabul legation or to Delhi.

The Decision to Kill Bose

On 7 March, the British Special Operations Executive (SOE), formed in 1940 to carry out sabotage, underground propaganda and other clandestine activities in enemy and neutral countries, brusquely informed its representatives in Istanbul and Cairo that Bose 'was understood to be traveling from Afghanistan with vital information to Germany via Iran, Iraq and Turkey'. They were asked 'to wire what arrangements they could make for his assassination'.⁵⁶

Even in the midst of war, this was a remarkable instruction. Bose was a British subject, not an enemy national. He was not some insignificant malcontent or lowly courier, but one of the most prominent politicians in India. He undoubtedly planned rebellion against British rule, but the appropriate imperial remedy for that was prosecution and execution, not unavowed assassination. He was scheduled for death because he was willing to aid either the Axis powers, Germany and Italy or the neutral Soviet Union, if they in turn would help him to free India. There is a striking absence of evidence in SOE records of any discussion of alternative ways of dealing with Bose—if British agents could get close enough to kill him, they surely could have attempted to kidnap him instead. Also significant is the manner of the decision: this was not an initiative dreamt up by an overenthusiastic local operative but a measured step determined at the highest level in London, without consultation with the British authorities in Delhi.⁵⁷ The latter were far better placed to judge the consequences in India should the assassination scheme become public. The decision to order his death is also striking for the very fact that any trace of it remains in official records. The initial assassination order was soon put on hold 'for fear of possible complications' but was reinstated in mid-April when an SOE officer in Iraq was ordered to kill this 'Communist agitator who was doing important work for the Axis' if he could be tracked down.⁵⁸

Once Bose crossed the Afghan/Soviet border, British intelligence was left in the dark about his whereabouts. As late as 26 May 1941, officials in Delhi thought

⁵⁵ British Library, IOR, L/PS/12/487, Delhi to British minister, Kabul, 5 March, and reply, 18 March 1941; St Antony's College, Oxford, Middle East Centre Archive, Fraser-Tytler papers, 1/1/12, Sir Kerr Fraser-Tytler to his mother, 15 March 1941.

⁵⁶ TNA, HS7/217, SOE war diary, 7 March 1941 SOE stationed an officer in Kabul in the autumn of 1941.

⁵⁷ Madhusree Mukerjee, *Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India during World War Two* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 22, maintains that Churchill must have ordered the assassination. There is no direct evidence of this in the available records. Furthermore, she bases her argument on the claim that Churchill's intelligence aide Major Desmond Morton was in charge of SOE: This is incorrect.

⁵⁸ TNA, HS9/217, SOE War Diary, 7 March and 22 April and 13 June 1941.

he was 'probably' still in Kabul. This was because Bose 'would be useful for Radio Propaganda from Russian, Italy or Germany, but nothing of the sort has eventuated'. Delhi asked the India Office in London 'whether [a] demand should be presented to [the] Afghan Government to deal with him', most likely through deportation to India.⁵⁹

On 13 June, SOE's agent in Istanbul, Gardyne de Chastelain, enquired whether the assassination order still stood.⁶⁰ SOE headquarters gave an unequivocal reply: 'the Foreign Office agreed to the liquidation of Chandra Bose being carried out on Turkish territory, but he should inform nobody'.⁶¹ The name de Chastelain is nowadays associated with the Irish peace process, where the retired Canadian General John de Chastelain (b. 1937) had a crucial role as chair of a commission overseeing the secret destruction of Irish republican and loyalist terrorist weapons and materiel. That his father was at the centre of a scheme to kill a man who drew such inspiration from the Irish independence struggle, and whose wartime experiences invite such parallels with that of Roger Casement, is a striking coincidence.

Bose's nephew Sisir has written that, through mistrust or simple prudence, Bose had, in 1941, established a second line of communication with his supporters in India of which his trusted assistant Bhagat Ram 'had no inkling'.⁶² Until Japan entered the war on 7 December 1941, her consul general in Calcutta acted as a conduit for messages between Subhas and his Indian followers. But the British had been decoding relevant Calcutta/Tokyo consular traffic since the late 1930s. On 5 September, Prime Minister Churchill saw one of the last such communications intercepted. In a covering note, the head of the British secret service categorized Subhas Chandra Bose as a radical leftist:

Sarat is ... the brother of Subhas Chandra Bose, the Indian agitator and leader of the Left Wing of the Congress who is now in Berlin ... Sarat ... is leader of the "Forward" group of Indian agitators who are in touch with the Axis powers and particularly with the Germans. The message ... [comes] from the Japanese Consul General in Calcutta, who is known to be intriguing with Sarat Chandra Bose and is acting as Sarat's link ... with his brother Subhas in Berlin. I understand that the Government of India are awaiting an opportunity of arresting Sarat and the prominent members of his group.⁶³

Sarat's message dated 1 September 1941 stated that 'with the exception of the Indian Communists all the people' hoped for a German victory: 'This I also hope for ... I absolutely agree that the independence of India depends on an Axis victory'. Propaganda 'is already being carried on' against any accord between Congress and the British. When 'India is simultaneously attacked by the Axis

⁵⁹ British Library, IOR, L/PS/12/487, Delhi to London, 26 May 1941.

⁶⁰ TNA, HS/7/220, SOE war diary, 16/17 June 1941, and HW12/263, Italian minister, Kabul, to Rome, 26 March 1941.

⁶¹ TNA, HS7/220, SOE war diary, 18 June 1941.

⁶² Bose, *Great Escape*, 67.

⁶³ TNA, HW1/48, 'C' to Churchill, 5 September 1941, enclosing Tokyo to Japanese Embassy, Berlin, 1 September 1941, conveying Sarat's message. 'C' is the title customarily used for heads of the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS or MI6).

from the East and from the West, it is intended to stir up internal disorder ... We are waiting for action by Japan against Thailand and Burma'.⁶⁴

On 11 December 1941, Sarat, who had just been appointed a minister in the provincial government of Bengal, was arrested. This was only four days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and the public pretext was his known contacts with the Japanese consulate general (though not his secret communications). He remained in detention until 1945. His health deteriorated during imprisonment, and he died aged just sixty in 1950.⁶⁵

Bose's key trusted link with his supporters in India, the mercurial Bhagat Ram, was arrested in Lahore in November 1942. He was recruited by DIB as a double agent. The British used him for a range of purposes: to study and thwart German and later Japanese espionage and subversion in India; to mislead the enemy about India's defensive preparations; and to deceive Bose and his Axis sponsors about the extent and capacity of his underground movement. Bhagat Ram was allowed to remain in touch with the Soviets, now Britain's allies. He also relayed strategic and military disinformation, first to the Italians, then the Germans and later to the Japanese. In addition, he was responsible for setting up clandestine radio stations in India, through which contact was maintained via the German legation in Kabul and eventually directly with Berlin. From first to last, these stations were under British control.

It is unclear why Bhagat Ram agreed to work for the British. As a committed communist, he probably felt obliged to help the Soviet Union's new ally. Leonard Gordon's sympathetic *Brothers Against The Raj* presented him as a straightforward Indian leftist patriot. That aligns with Bhagat Ram's autobiography, *The Talwars of Pathan Land*, published by a Communist printing house in 1976.⁶⁶ This deceptive work omitted any mention of dealings with British intelligence. Nor did it discuss the Communist Party's cooperation with the British authorities during the Quit India unrest of 1942–43, and against Bose's underground networks in India. On the other hand, Mihir Bose's study *Silver* portrays Bhagat Ram as both a committed patriot and a devout communist, who put to one side his loyalty to Bose when this conflicted with what his Soviet masters ordained.⁶⁷ The impact of the Communist Party's collusion with the Delhi authorities generally requires further research. British officials in India often observed that Communist security cooperation was patchy: in July 1942 the viceroy was informed of 'the steadily deteriorating attitude and performance of the Communist Party', and there were constant complaints from security officials in the various provinces about the half-hearted attitude of the local Communist leadership.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ TNA, HW1/48, Tokyo to Japanese ambassador, Berlin, relaying Sarat's message for Subhas Chandra Bose, 1 September 1941.

⁶⁵ Bose, *Centenary Offering*, 111–29.

⁶⁶ Bhagat Ram Talwar, *The Talwars of Pathan Land and Subhas Chandra's Great Escape* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1976).

⁶⁷ Bose, *Silver*.

⁶⁸ Jawaharlal Nehru University Library, C. P. Joshi papers, 1942/8A, photocopy of National Archives of India Home Poll F/7/15/1942, and 11B, photocopy of National Archives of India Home Poll

The Soviet Union did not reciprocate Bhagat Ram's loyalty. In October 1943, by which time Germany was in strategic retreat along the Eastern Front, a Soviet intelligence officer in Kabul tricked a German legation official into a meeting with a supposed new informant on Indian affairs. The Soviet officer told the hapless German official that the Soviets were 'completely acquainted' with Bhagat Ram's work on Germany's behalf. The patriotic German refused to be blackmailed into becoming a Soviet 'camouflage agent'. Instead, he reported the entire episode to Berlin, in a message which the British quickly decoded.⁶⁹ Bhagat Ram nevertheless 'somehow persuaded the Germans that the Russian exposure was nonsense and wormed his way still further into their confidence'. He later also began to deal with the Japanese legation in Kabul.⁷⁰ Everyone who encountered him in these years was greatly impressed by his talents and resourcefulness. DIB officer William Magan, who was his 'handler' for a time in Delhi, recalled 'Silver'—Bhagat Ram's British codename—as an agent of remarkable energy and capacity. As recently as 2008, Dietrich Witzel, a German intelligence operative who from 1941 to 1943 served in Kabul, spoke in the highest terms of Bhagat Ram and refused point-blank to believe that he had been under British control.⁷¹

According to his recent biographer Mihir Bose, Bhagat Ram's main British contact was the celebrated pre-war adventurer Peter Fleming, brother of the creator of the fictional spy James Bond. Fleming arrived in India in 1942 to work on strategic deception. But it is not clear that he dealt directly with Bhagat Ram, whose DIB handler William Magan told this writer that

Fleming's organisation was not responsible for anything except providing false information, which they did very badly. They had only one able officer. Fleming was himself a very ambitious person ... and had the ears of the Viceroy ... He aimed to take over [our] ... well-established and professional organisation altogether different from his ramshackle affairs ... He was not without ability, but it was devoted mainly to one thing, his own personal advancement.

Magan continued, perhaps unconvincingly, to say that he had no axe to grind against Fleming: 'We were good friends personally and I have no wish to criticise his activities'.⁷² There is no space here to analyse the respective claims about which British intelligence agency and officers controlled Bhagat Ram, save to note the truth of the saying that while failure is an orphan, success has many fathers.

F7/23/23/1943, minute, 18 November 1943.

⁶⁹ TNA, HW12/294, German Legation, Kabul to Berlin, 25 October 1943, outlining the confrontation with the Soviet intelligence officer.

⁷⁰ British Library, IOR, MS Eur161/80, undated notes on 'Silver Case' by E. W. Wace (formerly of the Punjab Police).

⁷¹ William Magan, *Middle Eastern Approaches: Experiences and Travels of an Intelligence Officer 1939–1948* (Norwich: Michael Russell, 2001), 17–19 and 84–85; author's interview with William Magan, 2 August 2000; Professor Milan Hauner's notes of his meeting with Herr Witzel, 26 September 2008, Munich, which he kindly provided to the author.

⁷² William Magan to the author, undated (August 2001).

Bose's time in Germany from April 1941 to February 1943 was deeply frustrating for him. The German authorities, while willing to use Bose to support sabotage and intelligence activities in India, dragged their feet on political questions. For over a year his presence in Germany remained a secret, and the Indian public was unaware of his fate: it was only when Japan's capture of Singapore appeared to signal the certain defeat of Britain's eastern empire that on 27 February 1942 he made his first radio broadcast to India announcing his ambition to free India from British rule. British intelligence was confused: a month later he was initially reported as one of a group of Indian independence activists killed in an aircraft crash in Nagoya Bay in Japan.⁷³ In May 1942, Bose finally secured an audience with Adolf Hitler. The meeting was unsatisfactory. Bose, who had read *Mein Kampf*, knew that Hitler viewed Indians as an inferior race and admired the manner in which a handful of British officials and soldiers held the entire Indian sub-continent in subjection. These long-held prejudices outweighed German geopolitical considerations. Hitler did, however, at least agree to facilitate Bose's return to the East. There, the Japanese were more receptive to his ambitions.⁷⁴

In February 1943, Bose finally had his wish. The British learned of this in advance through the decoded traffic of the Japanese ambassador in Berlin. That also disclosed the location in the Indian Ocean off Madagascar at which Bose would be transferred from a German to a Japanese submarine.⁷⁵ For whatever reason—possibly because such precise action might make the Japanese realize that their diplomatic traffic had been compromised—the British did not attempt the complicated task of intercepting and destroying the two vessels at their rendezvous. Bose was delivered safely to Sumatra. From there he was flown to Tokyo for consultations with the Japanese government. He then went to Singapore, where on 2 July he was greeted rapturously by the large Indian community (which, unlike the unfortunate Chinese population, had been well treated by Japanese forces, experiencing 'practically no atrocities').⁷⁶ Bose had a galvanic impact on the wider East Asian Indian diaspora in territories under Japanese control, and these communities provided considerable material support for his campaign to free India from British rule by force. He quickly took control of all Indian affairs and was finally able to secure Japanese blessing to establish a Provisional Indian Government. This was duly announced on 21 October 1943. He also revived the fledgling Indian National Army (INA), drawing on Indian soldiers captured in Malaya in 1941–42, which had had a difficult start under Captain Mohan Singh. Under Bose, the INA was reconstituted into a force of perhaps 50,000 ex-prisoners of war. There was also, uniquely, one regiment of women volunteers

⁷³ British Library, IOR, L/PS/12/761; Gordon, *Brothers Against the Raj*, 468–69 and 484–85; Bose, *Lost Hero*, 540.

⁷⁴ Prime Minister's Memorial Museum and Library, Oral History Transcript Acc. No. 179 (Madame Emilié Schenk, 5 October 1972), 30; Hauner, *India in Axis Strategy*, 373.

⁷⁵ TNA, HW12/294, Tokyo to Japanese embassy, Berlin, 22 January, and replies, 28 and 29 January 1943; Bose, *Lost Hero*, 609–10.

⁷⁶ Prime Minister's Memorial Museum and Library, Oral History Transcript Acc. No. 277 (Dr (Mrs) Lakshmi Sahgal), 17 November 1973.

(drawn from Malaya's Indian communities): 'these girls ... had never been to India ... but still they had that tremendous love of their country and that urge to fight for the freedom of their country'.⁷⁷

By the latter half of 1944, the INA was a large and credible force. Its limited battlefield achievements notwithstanding, it gave the British authorities in Delhi huge cause for concern. In July 1945, the retreating Japanese sought the 'dissolution' of what was left of the INA, whereas Bose wanted his remaining 18,000 soldiers to be kept together and transferred as a coherent force to Indo-China.⁷⁸ Narendra Singh Sarila, a senior diplomat and a strong critic of Bose's pursuit of first German and then Japanese support, has argued that the INA was Bose's greatest contribution to the achievement of Indian independence. This was not because of its fighting record, but because British attempts to prosecute some of its leading soldiers in the 'Red Fort' trials of 1946 proved a turning point for Indian public opinion. Sarila argues that the INA thus 'played an important role in demoralizing the British military establishment in India' in 1945–46 (by which time Bose himself was dead and the INA had disintegrated).⁷⁹

Bose's Last Months

In the final months of the Second World War, Bose revived his efforts to enlist Soviet support for Indian independence. His thinking was known to the British and Americans through decodes of Japanese communications. In November 1944, Tokyo relayed instructions via the Japanese embassy in Berlin from Bose to his representative in Germany, A. C. Nambiar (1897–1986). Nambiar was to make overtures to the Soviet Union (presumably through Soviet diplomats in neutral Switzerland): 'You will of course act after consultation with German Foreign Office and Japanese Embassy ... so as to avoid any possible misunderstanding'.⁸⁰ The Japanese also provided Bose with codes for his own use in the Far East, replacing these in January 1945 as they believed that the Soviets had broken them.⁸¹ It is unclear if this change hampered British access to Bose's own traffic, which cannot be found in the London archives, but Japanese communications remained vulnerable. These revealed preparations for 'triumphal celebrations' for Bose on his arrival in Bangkok in mid-January 1945, shed light on aspects of his rapprochement with the Burmese independence leader Ba Maw in Rangoon

⁷⁷ Prime Minister's Memorial Museum and Library, Oral History Transcript Acc. No. 654 (General Mohan Singh), 1 May 1975, 13–36, and Transcript Acc. No. 277 (Dr (Mrs) Lakshmi Sahgal), 17 November 1973, 36.

⁷⁸ NARA (National Archives and Records Administration, Maryland, United States), RG457, Box 17, 'Magic Summary', 26 July 1945, quoting from a Japanese message of 19 July from Bangkok to Tokyo.

⁷⁹ Narendra Singh Sarila, *The Shadow of the Great Game: The Untold Story of India's Partition* (Delhi: Harper Collins, 2005), 125.

⁸⁰ TNA, HW12/307, Foreign Ministry, Tokyo, to Japanese ambassador, Berlin, conveying Bose message for Nambiar, 3 December 1944.

⁸¹ TNA, HW12/308, Japanese ambassador, Berlin, to Tokyo, 3 January 1945.

in April, described his high spirits when he visited Bangkok again despite Thai unease at his presence, and carried his apology in July when the retreating INA, mistaking a Japanese official in Burma for a spy, shot him.⁸² Late in June, Japanese foreign ministry traffic carried a message from Bose to an Indian scientist based in Moscow, which was probably in preparation for his anticipated visit to seek Soviet support.⁸³ Summaries of Japanese decodes in American codebreakers' records, which generally discuss traffic not traced in the British series, also indicate that Bose had earlier suggested to Tokyo that 'a Japanese-Soviet coalition' was a 'vital prerequisite' for stabilizing Japan's position and had offered to help 'effect these policies'.⁸⁴

Conclusion

There are enormous differences of scale and historical significance between the two figures discussed. Bose was already a giant of the Indian independence movement when he escaped from house arrest in Calcutta in 1941. Casement was a relatively obscure retired British official when he left Ireland in 1914. His name became generally known and venerated in Ireland only after his execution in 1916. But there are also significant commonalities in the stories of these two patriots.

Both men were placed in mortal jeopardy principally through the insecure communications of the major powers to whom they turned for help, rather than through treachery or their own failings. When Casement landed in Ireland from a German submarine in April 1916, the police in Kerry were already on the lookout. Bose's presence in Kabul in February 1941 became known to the British through decoded Italian diplomatic traffic and occasioned London's order for his secret assassination. Two years later, his life was again endangered when the British decoded Japanese communications detailing the arrangements for his journey back to the Far East. At the war's end, the British and Americans were well aware through decodes of Bose's plan to travel via China to Moscow, although there is no evidence that the aircraft crash in Formosa, which led to his painful death on 18 August 1945 was caused by sabotage.⁸⁵

Of course, much of the material relating both to Bose and to Casement revealed through intercepted communications was second-hand information. Messages were often out of date by the time they were decoded and circulated. Furthermore, such sources were fragmentary and seldom told the whole story. Yet they certainly helped in uncovering interactions between anti-colonial movements and Britain's enemies, in peace and in war.

⁸² TNA, HW12/309, Japanese ambassador, Bangkok, to Tokyo, 17 January 1945, and HW12/315, Japanese ambassador, Rangoon, to Tokyo, 19 April 1945, and Japanese ambassador, Bangkok, to Tokyo, 21 May 1945 and 12 July 1945.

⁸³ TNA, HW12/321, Tokyo to Japanese embassy, Moscow, 28 June 1945.

⁸⁴ NARA, RG457, Box 17, 'Magic Summary', 17 June 1945.

⁸⁵ Mukerjee, *Churchill's Secret War*, 254, argues that this was probably an act of sabotage by SOE, but she offers no supporting evidence.

Both men were also betrayed, in different ways, by trusted comrades. In 1915 Casement's travelling companion, a boyfriend rather than a revolutionary associate, tried to lure him into British hands in Norway. Bose's right-hand man Bhagat Ram's betrayal was of an entirely different order. He deceived everyone who relied on him—Bose, the Germans, the Italians, the Japanese and the British—other than his Soviet masters. In return for the unwavering loyalty of this committed communist, the Soviets casually denounced him to the Germans in Kabul in October 1943, though with characteristic dexterity he contrived to overcome that setback.

We may also note the contrast in fortunes of Indian and Irish rebel efforts to persuade prisoners of war to fight for independence. Bose recruited a substantial military force, Roger Casement only a small, unreliable handful of men. During the Second World War, German attempts to form a 'Casement Brigade' from Irish prisoners of war again proved derisory. In 1962 William Magan, once Bhagat Ram's DIB handler but now a senior MI5 officer, reviewed a postwar analysis of the 'Casement Brigade'. It was 'of the greatest historical interest ... that the Germans, despite a determined effort, had no success whatsoever in their attempt to wean Southern Irish prisoners ... from their loyalty, as members of the British forces, to the Crown. History apart, it is perhaps not without some future security use as a guide to what might happen in comparable conditions'. Magan himself illustrates that phenomenon. A proud Irishman from Athlone, County Westmeath, he served the Crown for his entire career.⁸⁶

Other aspects of Casement's and Bose's stories bear comparison. Both were passionate advocates of national self-determination and decolonization, yet each made common cause with great powers bent on conquest and enslavement. Discussion of their lives and legacies has become intertwined with current political and social discourse. In India, a very broad spectrum of political and social actors, including extreme Hindu nationalists, invoke the memory of Bose and of the charismatic, secular, leftist revolutionary Bhagat Singh. A handful of zealots maintain that Bose is immortal and that he would never have forsaken chastity while India remained unfree. In Ireland, Roger Casement is honoured as a selfless patriot and humanitarian visionary. His homosexuality is no longer something of which to be ashamed. Yet the 'black diaries' indicate a pronounced interest in young boys of colour, whether or not he had sexual encounters with any of them. On the centenary of Casement's arrest on Banna Strand in County Kerry on 21 April 2016, President Michael D. Higgins skilfully navigated around that issue to make an unarguable point: it was manifestly 'outrageous' that discreditable material was circulated

⁸⁶ TNA, KV3/345, minute by Magan, 29 May 1962. See obituaries of Magan in *The Telegraph*, 22 January 2010, and *The Irish Times*, 27 March 2010, and his *Umma-More: The Story of an Irish Family* (Boston: Element Books, 1st ed., 1983), *An Irish Boyhood* (Edinburgh: Pentland Press, 1996), *Middle Eastern Approaches: Experiences and Travels of an Intelligence Officer* (Salisbury: Michael Russell, 2001), and *Soldier of the Raj* (Salisbury: Michael Russell, 2002).

in an extra-judicial attempt at undermining the international campaign for clemency ... Today we take great pride in recalling Roger Casement's idealism, his passionate defence of the human dignity of those who were the victims of a brutal world, and his commitment to the cause of Freedom, in Ireland and abroad.⁸⁷

Using the examples of Subhas Chandra Bose and Roger Casement, this article contrasted and compared how British intelligence monitored Indian and Irish anti-colonial activities during the two world wars, particularly by intercepting and decoding the secret communications of countries to whom the respective independence movements turned for help. The overall lesson is clear: Great powers are no better at keeping secrets than are radical organizations, anti-colonial or otherwise. 'Trust no one save yourselves' remains a prudent axiom.

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⁸⁷ Speech of President Michael D. Higgins, 21 April 1916, <https://president.ie/en/diary/details/president-attends-a-wreath-laying-ceremony-for-sir-roger-casement/speeches>, accessed 14 March 2024.