

## World

# India wants history to forget its legion of Nazi collaborators

Author who revealed how anti-British zealots sided with Hitler is now afraid to return home, **Oliver Moody** writes

In the final months of the Second World War, as his unit retreated in the face of Allied advances with barely a shot fired, Karl Hoffmann, the German linguist and SS officer, developed a ritual.

Once a day, he would put on breezy swing records from the 1920s and dictate magazine articles in bad Urdu while caressing the hair of his typist, a fervently Nazi corporal from Hamburg. Such was life in the "Tiger" legion, a chaotic and largely ornamental body of roughly 3,000 soldiers from British-ruled India who had mostly been captured in the North Africa campaign and recruited to the Wehrmacht.

A study of the legion, recently presented at the German Historical Museum in Berlin, has argued that it was part of an elaborate, frequently clumsy and fairly futile propaganda strategy in which the Nazi regime sought to stir up unrest in the British empire's most prized territories.

Until recently, the Third Reich's attempts to understand and instrumentalise the subcontinent had remained comparatively obscure, not least because it is a touchy subject in both Germany and India.

German scholars of India have often bristled at attempts to dissect their predecessors' enthusiastic collaboration with the SS and the wider Nazi leadership. The powerful Hindu nationalist movement associated with India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party has also been allergic to suggestions that some of its 20th-century heroes and forerunners not only admired Hitler but worked with his government.

The issue has become so toxic that Baijayanti Roy, the Indian-born historian and post-doctoral researcher at Goethe University Frankfurt, worries that she can no longer set foot in her former homeland.

Roy, who has dedicated her career to the study of the topic, said: "I would really like to go back for a visit, but I always feel very scared that somebody would stop me or deport me."

The daughter of two eminent Indian historians, Roy moved to Germany 25 years ago. She completed a doctorate on Albert Speer, the architect and armaments minister in Nazi Germany, before discovering that Indian studies in the Third Reich had been virtually untouched by scholars.

The regime's policy towards India was contradictory. Hitler was scornful of Indians, considering them a "fallen race" and sceptical of anti-colonial movements in general. However, Heinrich Himmler, the head of the SS and the police state, was obsessed with the supposed "Nordic-Aryan" origins of the Germanic race in India.

From 1939, Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's chief propagandist, bombarded the subcontinent with anti-British radio broadcasts to cultivate dissent.



Members of the Indian legion founded by the Nazis in the Second World War visited Berlin in 1943. Baijayanti Roy, below

Subhas Chandra Bose, the charismatic standard-bearer of the Indian independence movement's militant wing, set up shop in Berlin in 1941. He met Hitler and pushed the Nazi regime to back his vision of a military liberation of the sub-continent over Gandhi's approach of non-violence.

In her book, *The Nazi Study of India and Anti-Colonialism*, Roy revealed how the regime largely relied on a handful of German academics who specialised in ancient Indian culture and languages and in some cases had only a sketchy understanding of the contemporary.

The most successful of these was Walther Wüst, an expert on the Vedic scriptures who rose to the rank of *Oberführer* in the SS. Wüst ultimately became the rector of Munich university and handed the anti-Nazi dissident siblings Sophie and Hans Scholl over to the Gestapo.

Himmler also made him president of the *Ahnenbe* (Ancestral Heritage), the pseudoscientific think-tank he set up to investigate the roots of the Aryan "race".

While much of the German output was patronising or riddled with racist stereotypes, there

were influential Indian groups and individuals that went along with it. These included the Arya Samaj, a Hindu revivalist movement with several million followers, and KA "Pandit" Bhatta, a Sanskrit scholar who moved to Berlin and poured out Nazi propaganda in Germany and India.

"There was this tremendous respect for Germany, especially among right-wing Indian intellectuals," Roy said. "They saw Germany as this power that stood up to Britain and had this resurgence under Hitler. The Germans were seen as people to be emulated. The offensive parts were somehow brushed under the carpet."

In 1941, Bose prevailed upon the regime to found a "Free India legion" from those who had been taken prisoner by General Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's forces in North Africa. The activist envisaged this Tiger legion as the nucleus of an Indian army that would one day invade his homeland and liberate it from British rule.

The Germans, however, had other ideas. In their minds, the legion was essentially a propaganda outfit of decorative "flag bearers".

Soldiers in Sikh turbans were photographed being inspected by Rommel and manning the Atlantic Wall in occupied Holland and France. Aside from a brief and small-scale deployment to the Italian front, the Tiger unit barely saw combat throughout the war.

The legion's German officers tried to hold the unit together by publishing a daily magazine called *Bhaiband*

(Brotherhood), written in Hindustani and edited by Hoffmann.

"You have people [writing this stuff] who have never been to India and didn't really know any modern Indian languages," Roy said. "They have these very bookish ideas of what would appeal to the soldiers."

The Germans were also frequently appalled by their Indian brothers-in-arms. Officers in the legion lamented the supposed "moral corruption" of the Sikh soldiers and obsessed over the danger that the "exotic" Indian men might seduce European women with their magnetic powers of attraction.

After the war, most of the German Indologists were exonerated and allowed to return to their studies. Although Wüst was sentenced to six months' hard labour and never worked in a university again, the German Academy, which under his leadership had pushed much of the Third Reich's India agenda, was resurrected as the Goethe Institut.

Later generations of German India scholars regularly defended the academic records of Wüst and his colleagues, arguing that their research had to be treated separately from their political activities.

"I think they are clinging on to the last vestiges of their prestige," Roy said. "They are not people who look at the wider context and how views on imperialism and colonialism are being changed. They are still trapped in this view that they are teaching Indians how to understand their culture."

## Former PM jailed and fined £2bn over fraud

**Malaysia** A former prime minister has been sentenced to 15 years in prison and fined more than £2 billion after being convicted on fresh charges in one of the world's biggest financial scandals. Najib Razak, 72, who held office in Malaysia from 2009 to 2018, had already been imprisoned for fraudulently receiving about £750 million from the IMDB sovereign wealth fund fraud. Yesterday he was found guilty of corruption, abuse of power and money laundering. The fine he was given was nearly five times the amount he was accused of embezzling. Najib was jailed in 2022 for benefiting from IMDB, a fund he founded in 2009. In total, more than £3.3 billion was misappropriated. Najib denied the charges and insisted that he had been misled by officials from the fund. He said the large sums that appeared in his bank accounts had been donated by a Saudi prince, an account described by a judge as a "tale that surpassed even those from the Arabian Nights". Najib was convicted on four charges of abuse of power and 21 of money laundering. He was sentenced to 15 years for each of the offences, to be served concurrently. Originally due for release in 2028, Najib may now spend the rest of his life in prison unless his appeal is successful. His attempts to serve his sentence at home have already been rejected as unconstitutional.

## Saudi airstrikes claim

**Yemen** UAE-backed separatists who have taken over southern Yemen have accused Saudi Arabia of launching airstrikes against them. The Saudis recently gave an ultimatum to the Southern Transitional Council to withdraw its forces. Iran-backed Houthis who have attacked cargo ships in the Red Sea remain in control of the north.

## Japan arms build-up

**Japan** The cabinet has approved a record defence budget exceeding £43 billion as tensions rise in the region. It marks the fourth year of Japan's five-year plan to raise defence spending to 2 per cent of GDP. Shinjiro Koizumi, the defence minister, said the military build-up "does not change our path as a peace-loving nation".

## Fund for Isis informant

**France** A woman who lived like a "ghost" after leading police to an organiser of the 2015 Paris terror attacks has said she feels reborn after an appeal raised more than €200,000. "Sonia" became an Isis target and had to leave France, and her financial struggles in witness protection were revealed in a TV show marking the tenth anniversary of the attacks.

## Ferrari wins in court

**Italy** The sports car manufacturer Ferrari has successfully sued a Naples company for illegally importing thousands of unauthorised remote-control toy model cars from China. The supreme court upheld an earlier verdict that imposed a €20,000 fine on the importer, Pamax, and ordered the confiscation of the toys.

