

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 360

“Now You Belong to the Japanese Army”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Among nationalists in India, the Second World War was an opportunity to press for independence, but different nationalist leaders had different ideas on how to take advantage of it.

Some Indian nationalists chose to throw in their lot with the Axis.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 360. Now You Belong to the Japanese Army.

We haven't talked about India since episode 294, so it's about time we get caught up, especially since the Imperial Japanese Army is now on India's eastern border. Here's a reminder of what we discussed in that episode: the British Parliament passed the Government of India Act, which reformed the system of government in India, with provincial-level government left mostly in the hands of elected Indian provincial parliaments, while a federal legislature would represent all of India. The second part of this reform required the consent of the rulers of the Princely States.

The Indian National Congress objected to the plan in that it still gave the British significant veto power over the elected governments and complained that the plan was devised so as to advantage regional or religious parties over a national movement like the Congress. The Muslim League also rejected the plan. By this time, leaders of the Muslim League, like Muhammad Ali Jinnah, were coming around to the view that an all-Indian democratic state was a bad idea, as it would inevitably mean that Indian Muslims would be ruled by Hindus forever.

Despite the Congress's objections to the plan, Congress candidates stood in provincial elections across India, and won a sweeping endorsement from Indian voters. Congress won outright majorities in five of the eleven provinces and came in as the largest single party in four others. When the provincial parliaments were seated, the Congress Party either controlled or was the leading coalition partner in eight of the eleven new provincial parliaments. The three exceptions, Punjab, Bengal, and Sind, were the three regions that were majority Muslim.

Many British were skeptical of Congress's ability to govern India, as opposed to protesting and causing trouble, but Congress ruled over its eight provinces well enough and remained popular with the voters. British members of the Indian Civil Service began taking their instructions from Indian politicians and found the Indian leaders capable; some formed friendships with their new bosses. For the first time since its founding, the Indian National Congress was working with the British, rather than in opposition to them.

But there was still no Indian federal government. The Viceroy and other British officials in India spent the period from 1936 to 1939 in an effort to garner enough support from the princes to bring the federal government piece of the plan into operation, but they were unsuccessful.

You might wonder how, over this same period, the world's most famous pacifist was reacting to the situation in Europe. To Mohandas Gandhi, the rise of fascism was the natural consequence of Western civilization's industrial materialism and spiritual decay.

In 1938, during the Sudetenland Crisis, Gandhi suggested that the Czechs employ satyagraha to resist a German invasion. He suggested to Jewish Germans the same strategy in opposing Nazi persecution and further suggested Jewish people should pray for Adolf Hitler, advice that, shall we say, doesn't age well.

After Kristallnacht, a group of American Methodist missionaries met with Gandhi and told him they admired him, but noted that the Nazis were burning synagogues and the Italians were using poison gas against the Ethiopians. When it came to the likes of Hitler or Mussolini, dictators with no scruples, a strategy of nonviolence would be useless; indeed, it might encourage further brutality.

Gandhi did not agree, replying, "Your argument presupposes that men like Hitler or Mussolini are beyond redemption."

Gandhi wrote letters to Hitler, praising what he saw as the *Führer's* virtues while counseling a peaceful approach to international disputes. Needless to say, Hitler ignored Gandhi's advice, but in a 1938 meeting with British Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax, Hitler offered the British government a bit of unsolicited advice on how to deal with the nationalist movement in India: "Shoot Gandhi."

Then came the war. On September 3, 1939, Britain declared war on Germany. So did India. Most Indians learned they were at war when they heard the King's speech over the BBC Overseas Service, followed by an announcement from the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, declaring a state of emergency in India.

The war put the Viceroy in a tricky situation. Given the unstable political situation in India, it would have been wiser to consult with Indian leaders first. Only, there was no national Indian government for him to consult with. He might have consulted with the provincial parliaments or

with the Indian National Congress, but the reality was they likely would have opposed India's getting involved in a European war. Anyway, under British law as it stood at the time, the British declaration of war automatically brought India along, irrespective of what the Indians thought about it. So it was just as well that he went ahead with the declaration.

The following day, Gandhi met with the Viceroy and pledged his support for the British war effort. This may come as a surprise at first, but don't forget Gandhi had done the same twice before: in 1899, at the beginning of the Boer War, and in 1914, at the beginning of the First World War.

Gandhi emphasized that his pledge was a personal one and that he did not speak for the Congress. In 1939, the leader of the Congress was Jawaharlal Nehru, whom we've met before on the podcast, though I believe this may be the first time I pronounced his name correctly. Since the death of his father, Motilal Nehru, the younger Nehru and Gandhi had become close, and the now-fifty-year-old Nehru was seen as the logical successor to the now-seventy-year-old Gandhi.

Like Gandhi, Nehru had studied in England and become a lawyer. Unlike Gandhi, Nehru had embraced the ideas of the British socialists of the time, people such as H.G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw, and Bertrand Russell, and adopted many of their views. To Nehru, the colonialism that smothered India was an irrevocably linked to capitalism, and socialism was the solution to both. He supported Stalin and the Soviet Union, declaring in 1936 that in the USSR "we find the essentials of democracy."

Though Gandhi and Nehru were close, they disagreed over many things. Gandhi saw the struggle for Indian independence through a spiritual lens; Nehru saw it through the Marxist lens of class conflict and expressed impatience with Gandhi the spiritual leader, complaining that "[Ghandi's] continual references to God irritate me exceedingly."

What also irritated Nehru exceedingly was Gandhi's rush to support Britain in the struggle against Germany. Nehru saw the war as a golden opportunity to force the question of Indian independence, one that Gandhi seemed prepared to throw away. On September 14, Congress issued what it called its September Manifesto. It extolled democracy and condemned Fascism and Nazism, but it also argued that British imperialism was more akin to fascism than it was to democracy. Congress offered to support the British war effort, but only in exchange for a pledge that India would receive full independence after the war ended. Gandhi did not agree with the Congress position, but felt obliged to stand with them.

The Viceroy spent the following month in one-on-one meetings with all the leading Indian political leaders, including Gandhi, Nehru, and Jinnah, in an effort to work out some common ground. In the end, they could not, and on October 17, he released a statement rejecting the September Manifesto. In response, every Congress member of the provincial parliaments resigned.

British skeptics of the Congress saw their pessimism confirmed. Congress had demonstrated once again that it was more interested in fomenting unrest and disorder and confrontation in India than it was in negotiation and cooperation. For the Congress, they had needed to take a stand, but it had come at a cost: the loss of the standing and political influence control of those provincial governments had provided them.

Now the only provinces that still had functioning parliaments were the three Muslim provinces of Punjab, Bengal, and Sind.

Congress's loss was the Muslim League's opportunity. Congress's intransigence had created a political vacuum, into which the League could move. On March 22, 1940, the Muslim League, meeting in Lahore, passed a resolution calling for the creation of Pakistan, a separate Muslim-majority nation.

The Lahore Resolution came as a surprise to the British and a setback to Nehru and the Congress. To Gandhi, it was a devastating rejection.

In July 1940, following the shock of the Fall of France, Congress chose to moderate its demands somewhat. Now it asked for the immediate creation of a national government for India that included participation by Congress and a pledge that India would be granted independence at some time after the war ended. In August, the Viceroy made a counteroffer. The Viceroy's Executive Council would be expanded and Indian leaders appointed to the new seats. After the war, a representative body of Indians would be created to draft an Indian constitution, toward the goal of Dominion status for India, equal to Britain and to the other Dominions.

This was the most generous offer the British side had ever made to Indian nationalists, but it came with a significant caveat: a pledge to India's minorities that Britain would not transfer rule over India to any government "whose authority is directly denied by large and powerful elements in Indian national life."

In other words, the Muslim League would have a veto over any proposed Indian government. This was unacceptable to Congress. It was also unacceptable to the Muslim League, which demanded partition as the price for its support.

[music: "Something Stirring."]

In mid-1940, France fell and Britain appeared to be wobbling. For a time, it seemed Britain would lose the war. Indian nationalists hoped to use British desperation to bargain for independence for India, but the British refused to meet their demands.

Britain did not fall in 1940, and the year 1941 saw some improvement in Britain's position. It was now clear that Britain was not going to fall; it was not going to be invaded or bombed into submission. This rebound in British fortunes led to an uneasy standoff between the British Raj and the Indian nationalists.

But while Congress, which claimed to be the only organization that spoke for the entire Indian nation, was refusing to cooperate with the British until their demands were met, millions of ordinary Indians were volunteering to serve in the Indian Army and fight for the King-Emperor and the Empire. Around two and a half million Indians volunteered for the Army over the course of the war, despite anything Congress had to say about it.

I've already mentioned that Indian units were fighting in North Africa against the Italians, and then Rommel's panzers, and I told you about the Indian Army's role in Iraq, following the pro-Axis coup in that country. I want to take a few minutes now to get caught up on other military campaigns in the Middle East in which the Indian Army participated.

Let's begin with that coup in Iraq, which I described in episode 343. I said then that by June 2, 1941, the new Iraqi government had been defeated and fled the country for Iran, as did the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, and the old government and old regent were restored to power, and of course Indian Army units participated in this action.

The coup leaders in Iraq received air support from Germany and Italy, which was made possible because the French government in Vichy had agreed to allow the Axis the use of its air bases in Syria. The French in Syria also provided arms and support from Syria directly to the Iraqis.

With Greece and Crete already under German control, the British decided that a French-controlled Syria and Lebanon aligned with the Axis presented a danger to the British position in the Middle East at the same time Rommel's panzer corps was threatening the British in the west.

On June 8, 1941, just days after the coup in Iraq had been put down, British-led forces in the Middle East moved to invade Syria and Lebanon. A force of Indian, Australian, and Free French units in Palestine invaded from the south, while a second force based in Iraq, consisting of Indian and Jordanian troops, invaded from the west. British and Australian units provided air and naval support for the invasion, while Scottish commandos based in Cyprus raided the coast.

After a month of fighting, the southern force had made its way to the outskirts of Beirut. The French commander asked for an armistice, which was signed on July 14. A few days later, Charles de Gaulle flew from Brazzaville in the Congo to Damascus to assume control over Syria and Lebanon on behalf of the Free French movement.

Remember that back in 1936, the French government negotiated treaties with Lebanon and Syria, under which these two countries would have their own autonomous governments immediately and full independence in three years. Unfortunately for the Syrians and the Lebanese, the French National Assembly had not ratified either treaty before the Fall of France in 1940. Now the Lebanese and Syrians pressed the Free French to make good on the promised treaty terms. I mean, you guys are supposed to be fighting for freedom and democracy, right?

In the case of Lebanon, the new Free French administration agreed to independence on November 26, 1941. A number of Allied countries, including the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Soviet Union soon recognized the new Lebanese government, although the French retained their military bases in the country. Two years later, in November 1943, the Lebanese Chamber of Deputies unilaterally voted to terminate the French Mandate in Lebanon. The French responded by arresting the Lebanese cabinet, but international outrage forced the French to back down a few weeks later and accept full Lebanese independence.

As for Syria, that country's government declared its independence in 1941, though Syria would not be recognized internationally until 1944. It would not be until 1946 that the last French soldiers withdrew from the two countries.

Now that the British had secured Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, they next turned their attention to Iran. I last talked about Iran in episode 155, when I told you about the turmoil in that country following the First World War, including significant Soviet and British meddling. The British-supported military commander Reza Khan seized control of Tehran, the capital, in February 1921, and in 1925 had the Iranian parliament, the Majlis, proclaimed him the new Shah and founder of a new dynasty. Afterward, he ruled as Reza Shah Pahlavi.

The new shah took control of an isolated, undeveloped, and fractious nation. For the following 16 years, he strove to modernize Iran. It was he who pushed for everyone else to call his country Iran and stop saying Persia. He introduced the first judicial system in Iran, the first radio station, and ordered the abolition of slavery. He oversaw construction of the Trans-Iranian Railway, beginning at the port city of Bandar Shahpur on the Persian Gulf and running north through Tehran and on to the port of Bandar Shah on the Caspian Sea. He founded the University of Tehran and Iran's first public school system. He banned hijabs and all forms of veils and pushed for Iranians of all sexes to wear Western-style clothing. He established Iran's first aircraft factory, which produced planes licensed from the German Junkers company.

Yeah, about that last item. Iran had declared neutrality in the present war, but it maintained diplomatic relations with the Axis nations of Germany, Italy, Hungary, and Romania. It was manufacturing German planes and thousands of German nationals lived and worked in Iran, some in sensitive positions, such as communications, railroads, and that aircraft plant.

The British had petroleum interests in Iran, both the oil fields and the huge refinery at Abadan, which produced fuels essential to the British war effort. The British government began pressing the Iranian government to break diplomatic ties with the Axis nations and expel those German nationals, ostensibly because many of them were in a position to sabotage the refinery or the oil wells.

When Germany attacked the Soviet Union in late June, that Trans-Iranian Railway became a crucial link along which Britain and the United States could send military aid to the Soviet Union. Both Britain and the USSR feared interference in or sabotage of the railway could disrupt

those vital shipments. There were also worries that Turkey might be persuaded to allow the Axis militaries to transit its territory and occupy Iran, not to mention invade Syria or Iraq or the Soviet Caucasus.

Soon both Moscow and London were demanding assurances that Iran would not allow any of this German mischief, as well as breaking diplomatic relations with the Axis powers and expelling those German nationals. By August 1941, these demands escalated to an ultimatum. When Iran declined to comply, Soviet and British forces launched a surprise attack on Iran on August 25. In the north of the country, two Soviet armies invaded from the Caucasus and a third from Central Asia. Indian Army units stationed in Iraq invaded Iran from the west, quickly seizing the refinery and Iran's most important oil fields.

When the Shah learned of the surprise assault, he summoned the British and Soviet ambassadors and asked them why they were attacking his country and why they had not declared war. They replied that this was because the Shah had not met their demands concerning German nationals in Iran. The Shah asked them whether they would withdraw their forces if he met their demands, but they declined to answer that question.

The Iranian Army was caught by surprise and overwhelmed. After six days, Iran surrendered. Casualties on both sides were minimal. The Shah agreed to dismiss all Axis diplomats from Tehran and hand over all German nationals in Iran to British or Soviet custody. But the Shah did not comply with the last part. Motivated by fears that these German civilians faced years of internment and in the case of the Soviet Union, possible execution, the Shah stalled the Allies while working to repatriate the Germans through Turkey.

In mid-September, the Allies discovered the deception. The Red Army occupied Tehran and the Shah was deposed. He lived the rest of his life in exile on Mauritius, and later in South Africa, until he died in 1944, at the age of 66. The Shah's 21-year-old son, Crown Prince Mohammad Reza Pahlavi succeeded him as Shah. He would rule Iran until 1979.

As a side note, you may recall the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, who had fled to Lebanon and then to Iraq and then to Iran to escape prosecution by the British for his role in the Arab uprising in Palestine. When the Allies occupied Iran, the Grand Mufti was spirited to Europe by Italian intelligence agents. The Turkish government would not give him permission to enter Turkey, so the Italians helped smuggle him through and on to Europe under a false identity.

Once in Europe, the Grand Mufti met with Mussolini and then with Hitler, to ask for a declaration of Axis support for independence for the Arab states of Iraq, Syria, Transjordan, and Palestine. The Grand Mufti's proposed declaration included a statement that the Arab countries had the right to "solve the question of the Jewish elements" in Arab lands in the same manner as it had been "solved" in Germany.

Hitler refused to make such a public declaration, explaining that it would alienate the French government in Vichy. But he assured the Grand Mufti that Germany's goal was to press every European nation to solve its "Jewish problem," and that after Germany defeated the Soviet Union, it would turn its attention to Arab independence and "the destruction of the Jewish element residing in the Arab sphere."

Nazi race theories disdained Arabs, and Hitler himself had once described Arabs as "half-ape." Nevertheless, the Nazis were happy to use the Grand Mufti for propaganda purposes. He helped recruit three divisions of Muslim soldiers from Bosnia and Albania to fight for the Axis.

The Grand Mufti of Jerusalem was not the only political dissenter in the British Empire who snuck off to Berlin to ask the Germans to help their country achieve independence. There was also the Indian nationalist Subhas Chandra Bose, whose name has cropped up a couple of times before in our episodes on India, most recently in episode 252.

Bose, like Nehru, was a generation younger than Gandhi and impatient with the Mahatma's strategy of satyagraha. But while Nehru was unwilling to make a public break from Gandhi, Bose was not. In his view, if force was necessary to bring about Indian independence, then bring it on. Nor was Bose committed to democracy; he believed that an independent India would have to be governed by an authoritarian socialist leader, on the model of Turkey's Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

In 1938, Bose was elected President of the Indian National Congress. In 1939, he was re-elected, despite the opposition of Gandhi and Nehru, but his leadership proved divisive, and he was forced to resign.

In January 1941, Bose escaped India with the assistance of the Abwehr, German military intelligence. He passed through Afghanistan and into the Soviet Union with the aid of a false Italian passport. He met with Soviet officials in Moscow and tried to interest them in supporting a popular uprising in India. The Soviets gave that idea a hard pass, so Bose continued on to Berlin, where German officials were much more interested. With support from the German Foreign Office, Bose established a Free India Center in Berlin and a radio station that would broadcast Axis propaganda to India.

Bose assisted the Germans in recruiting about 4,500 Indian prisoners of war whom the Germans had captured in North Africa into a military unit, the Indian Legion, meant to one day liberate India from the British. Bose was trying to set himself up as the Charles de Gaulle of a Free India movement and lobbied the German government to recognize him as the head of an Indian government in exile. This the Germans would not do; they realized their guest was far less of a political force in India than were people like Gandhi or Nehru.

Over the course of 1941, German leaders toyed with the idea of invading India. This would take place following the defeat and occupation of the Soviet Union, you see; the Wehrmacht could then advance from the Caucasus into Iran and then India and oust the British.

Alas for the Germans and their Indian allies, the Soviet Union was not defeated. It survived 1941, and the year 1942 dawned with the German realization that the war in Russia was going to be much longer and bloodier than they had expected, so the Germans shelved their plans for invading India.

Meanwhile, back in India, the political situation was relatively quiet through most of 1941, but the month of December came with the dramatic Japanese attacks in the Pacific, including the sinkings of HMS *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, and Japanese armies capturing Malaya, Singapore, and Burma. The Japanese Army was now sitting on India's eastern border. The Japanese Navy had attacked British naval bases in Ceylon, and occupied the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal. As was the case with Australia, the war was no longer a distant, European matter. Now India itself was facing the danger of invasion by the Japanese.

These developments encouraged Subhas Chandra Bose; they also made him belatedly realize that he had traveled to the wrong Axis power; he and his Indian Legion would have been far better off in Singapore than in Berlin. In May 1942, Bose had his one and only face-to-face meeting with Adolf Hitler. He made one final plea for German recognition as the leader of Free India. When Hitler refused, he asked to be transported to Japanese-controlled territory in Asia. Hitler agreed to this, but it would not be an easy thing to accomplish. The German submarine *U-180* carried him into the South Atlantic and around the Cape of Good Hope, where it rendezvoused with the Japanese submarine *I-29*, which took him the rest of the way to Japan.

The fall of Singapore had been a great victory for Japan and the worst military disaster in British history. It had also been the worst military disaster in Indian history. Among the many prisoners the Japanese captured were about 40,000 Indian POWs taken in Malaya and Singapore. When Singapore surrendered, one British officer told his Indian soldiers, "Now you belong to the Japanese Army."

These Indian POWs were as shocked as anyone else. It seemed to them that the British Empire was collapsing before their very eyes.

The Japanese had plans for their Indian prisoners. The first step was simple and direct. Japanese soldiers sorted the prisoners into two groups based on their reaction to the name "Gandhi." Those who nodded or otherwise showed approval went into one group. The other group were executed. One Indian Army captain told the Japanese that his father was a personal friend of the Mahatma; that saved his life. He then watched as a Japanese soldier beheaded his British lieutenant with a katana.

After the fall of Burma, the Japanese Army was on India's doorstep. Gandhi made a public plea for calm and warned the Japanese that if they invaded India, they should not expect to be welcomed.

The fall of Burma deprived India of its main source of rice imports, just as hundreds of thousands of refugees from Burma were flooding into Bengal province in eastern India. The price of rice immediately rose 15% in the region, and a humanitarian disaster was in the making.

But that is a story for another episode. We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Richard for his kind donation, and thank you to Oren for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Richard and Oren help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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Next week is a bye week for the podcast, but I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time, here on the *History of the Twentieth Century*, as, after nearly five months, the United States strikes its long awaited first blow against Japan. The Doolittle Raid, in two weeks' time, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. The British and Americans sent aid to the Soviet Union over three routes. The first was by convoy to the Soviet Arctic ports of Archangel or Murmansk. This aid was vulnerable to interception by German air and naval forces stationed in Norway, but it was Stalin's preferred route, as it brought the supplies closer to the front line than did the alternatives.

The second was directly from the Pacific ports of the United States and Canada to Vladivostok via Soviet-flagged cargo ships. Since the USSR and Japan were not at war, the Japanese took no action against these ships, much to Adolf Hitler's annoyance. Stalin liked this route the least, because after the aid was unloaded at Vladivostok, it had to be carried all the way along the Trans-Siberian Railway to reach the front lines.

Then there was the Persian Corridor, the route I told you about in this episode. Although the Iranians wanted their nation to be called Iran, Winston Churchill insisted on using the name Persia, and "Persian corridor" is the name you see in contemporary sources. After the war, Churchill explained he used the name Persia because Iran sounded too much like Iraq.

The Persian Corridor was Stalin's middle choice, but for the Western Allies it was the easiest route, and nearly half of the total aid shipped to the USSR during the war traveled along the Persian Corridor.

[music: Closing War Theme]

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