

Intelligence in Public Media

Underground Asia – Global Revolutionaries and the Assault on Empire

Tim Harper (Harvard University Press, 2021), 826 pages, 16 pages of photos, 5 maps.

Reviewed by J. R. Seeger

On July 1, 1909, the Indian National Association held an informal gathering in Jehangir Hall of the Imperial Institute in South Kensington, London. Luminaries from the government and the academic world mixed with Indian students, both scholarship students and sons of wealthy Indians. At 11p.m., a young student named Madan Lal Dhingra walked up to Sir William Curzon Wyllie of the Indian Office. Earlier in the evening, Wyllie had discussions with other well-dressed Indian students as he mingled with the crowd. He likely expected the young man walking up to him to be just another student interested in another discussion. Instead, Dhingra walked up to Wyllie and shot him four times.

An Indian Parsi physician from Shanghai unsuccessfully attempted to save Wyllie's life, and Dhingra killed him as well. Before he could kill himself, Dhingra was apprehended by bystanders and held until the police arrived. When the police searched his apartment in Bayswater, they found a Russian artist's painting of *The Suppression of the Indian Revolt* depicting the execution of Indians from the 1857 mutiny, a picture of Lord Curzon annotated with "heathen dog," and multiple loose pistol cartridges. During his trial, Dhingra offered no defense other than a formal statement in which he appealed to Indian sympathizers in America and Germany. The statement included the following: "A nation held down by foreign bayonets is in a perpetual state of war." (119–21)

Over the past 20 years, the intelligence and special operations communities of the United States and our NATO allies have spanned the globe as they hunted members of an international terrorist network. Just like Dhingra, these terrorists believed in change through the barrel of a gun or through the timer of a bomb. It is easy to imagine that this type of terrorist network could only exist in our interconnected 21st century world of the internet and global air travel. Members of the same Intelligence Community who served during the Cold War could compare the terrorist challenge to the challenges posed by the USSR and its Warsaw Pact allies. After the demise of the USSR, the

files of the Soviet and Warsaw Pact security services revealed the profound connection between communist security organizations and regional terrorist organizations and Third World insurgencies. Again, these connections, these networks were a creation of a post-World War II world and seemed an inevitable creation of the end of European colonialism. In *Underground Asia*, Tim Harper argues that these types of transnational conspiracies existed long before the Cold War.

Underground Asia focuses on the anticolonial movements in India, Malaysia, Indonesia, China, and French Indochina from 1905 to 1927. Harper addresses many of the early 20th century Asian revolutionaries and how political doctrines such as anarchism, socialism, and communism affected their actions. He argues the rise of the modern industrial nation-states and the rise of political philosophies hostile to these modern industrial nation-states captured the imagination of Asians living under colonial rule. It was these same Asians who served as the founding members of the successful independence movements throughout Asia in the second half of the 20th century.

Harper describes the early 20th century as a time of movement: of men from the various European colonies in Asia to Japan, Europe, the United Kingdom, and North America and of ideas from Europe to Asia. The men traveled by ship in search of jobs or advanced education and met fellow travelers in small enclaves of workers and student, probably best described as ghettos. The ideas traveled by books, journals, and lectures. During informal meetings, the expatriate Asians shared ideas on what had to be accomplished to end colonial rule in their respective homelands. Some of these travelers returned to their homelands to start small-scale resistance efforts. Some remained as exiles for the rest of their lives writing articles and books hostile to colonial governments. Other exiled revolutionaries managed safehavens for their colleagues when they needed to escape the police. And some of these men committed themselves to violent revolution.

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Harper makes it clear from the beginning that he is not interested in creating a standard history of these revolutionary conspiracies or the events associated with unrest in the Asian colonies of Britain, France, and Holland. In the foreword, he states,

This book offers, quite deliberately and literally, an eccentric view of Asian history. It traces the insurgent geography of what I call "underground Asia." I try to describe the terrain revolutionaries carved out of themselves, and how certain milieus generated new ideas and strategies for action. It tells of lives that were lived at the interstices of empires and struggles that did not see the nation-state as its sole end or as the natural ordering of a future world. (xxviii)

Following through on that premise, Harper writes of individual actions of revolutionaries from the turn of the 20th century until 1927. The book provides insights previously unavailable to general readers: the motivations for Asian revolutionaries in that period detailed in their own letters and diaries as well as from revolutionary ideologues whose names have long disappeared into the vault of history. Previous works on the subject addressed the larger, strategic context of the anticolonial movements or the role of outside influence from German, Japanese, or Soviet agent provocateurs. In contrast, Harper has excavated personal diaries, autobiographies of Asian revolutionaries, and revolutionary journals and newspapers to craft a vivid description of their lives.

One thread Harper follows in the book is the importance of European powers in sustaining the most effective of these organizations. At first, support came from the Imperial Germany. Prior to and during the First World War, Germany was determined to undermine the English, French, and the Dutch colonial empires. The German operation was managed by a senior "orientalist" named Max Von Oppenheim and was international in scope. Harper is not the first to write on the subject. Donald M. McKale's *War by Revolution*, Jules Stewart's *The Kaiser's Mission to Kabul*, and Lionel Gossman's *The Passion of Max Von Oppenheim* are just three works that provide even greater detail in the level of German involvement in Asia.^a

Harper details how the German effort reached North America. The German consulate in San Francisco funded

an effort on the part of Indian exiles who organized under the Ghadar Party. The level of commitment was exceptional. Not only did the Germans support the California-based party, but they also funded the purchase of a small freighter and over 10,000 firearms. The project was designed to deliver both arms and Indian revolutionaries to Asia. Only through a series of misadventures did this clandestine effort fail when US Customs agents captured the ship in August of 1915. British officers, especially the tenacious David Petrie from the Indian Criminal Investigation Department, hunted the revolutionaries around the globe. These investigators provided detailed information to both the Bureau of Investigation (the Department of Justice predecessor to the FBI) and the New York Police Department against other members of the conspiracy as well as outlining for California authorities the nature of the Ghadar conspiracy.

By mid-1917, US authorities had arrested some of these Indian revolutionaries, and in late 1917, the federal court in San Francisco opened conspiracy investigations on 105 Indians. Only 37 were eventually arraigned, the rest had escaped capture. At the time, this case was the largest single foreign conspiracy trial ever conducted by the US government. By the time the trial began, the United States had declared war on Germany, and the defendants faced a hypersensitized US public as a result of the German-sponsored Black Tom bombing in New York harbor and the Zimmerman Telegram revealing German offers to assist the Mexican government in recovering much of the US Southwest. Twenty-nine of the 37 were convicted, one was acquitted, and one was certified insane. Two of the accused died in the courthouse when one of them killed another and was then shot by a US marshal. The remaining three escaped custody and were never found.

By 1918, revolutionaries in Asia could choose between two different allies ready to work against the British, the French, and the Dutch. The German effort continued until the end of the war while, by early 1918, the newly established Bolshevik government in Moscow began fomenting the international communist revolution. For Asian anarchists and socialists, the appeal of joining an international communist movement drew revolutionaries from virtually every political doctrine and away from their alliances with Germany. Just like their counterparts

a. *War by Revolution* (Kent State University Press, 1998); *The Kaiser's Mission to Kabul. A Secret Expedition to Afghanistan in World War I* (I. B. Taurus, 2014); *The Passion of Max Von Oppenheim* (Open Book Publishers, 2013).

in Berlin, the Bolsheviks in Moscow were less interested in the needs of their Asian “comrades” than they were in undermining the Western colonial powers. The Communist International dispatched funds that helped publish revolutionary tracts. It provided safehaven in Moscow and the Soviet secret service, the Cheka, helped train these revolutionaries in skills necessary to survive in a hostile political environment. Again, Harper’s description of Soviet support to Asian revolutionaries is not the first in print. Peter Hopkirk’s *Setting the East Ablaze* covered in detail Bolshevik support to revolutionaries throughout Asia over two decades ago.^a

While this is an important book for anyone interested in 20th century Asian history or European colonial history, it is not an easy read. The book is filled with eccentric details of dozens of revolutionaries, their friends, their wives, and their families. It is probably best understood as a series of biographies of Asian revolutionaries in the early 20th century. Some like Mao and Ho Chi Minh are well known, while others are absolutely lost in time. Harper does not make any effort to separate the key historical figures from the simply interesting (or eccentric) ones and at times the book can seem to be a jumble of biographic information dancing across the globe. Harper’s writing style is very academic. His dense prose often turns a single paragraph into a disquisition running more than a page long. Finally, Harper assumes the reader already understands the “standard” histories of the colonial independence movements in India, Malaysia, Indonesia, China, and Vietnam. That means, it may be hard for the

uninitiated to follow where some of the revolutionaries fit into the post–World War II stories of postcolonial Asia.

In the last six pages of the book, Harper offers a cursory conclusion to his work. He writes,

For many years, the memory of the global underground dissolved into national stories. In this sense it remained a lost country: a history of revolutionary failure, or of something that did not happen. But, as it re-emerges, the view from the underground shifts our understanding of larger events in significant ways. . . .

Seen from the underground, time is loosened further, and the history of what later became known as the “global Cold War” takes on a longer duration, with its beginnings in the Bolshevik panic across empires in the 1920s, or even back in the earlier struggle against international anarchism. This protracted conflict is a window on the experience of human movement in the twentieth century. (653–54)

Returning to his warning in the foreword that he is going to offer an eccentric view of Asian history, Harper makes a detailed case for clues from the early 20th century revealing some of the Asian mysteries of today. For this reason alone, *Underground Asia* belongs on the bookshelf of any professional interested in our current focus on the region.



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a. *Setting the East Ablaze: Lenin’s Dream of an Empire in Asia* (Oxford Paperbacks, 1984); *On Secret Service East of Constantinople: The Great Game and the Great War* (John Murray, 1994).

