

editing his remarkable but very long parliamentary speeches. But we must continue to welcome and support this ambitious project. <A.R.H.Copley@kent.ac.uk>

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A REVOLUTIONARY HISTORY OF INTERWAR INDIA: VIOLENCE IMAGE, VOICE AND TEXT. By KAMA MACLEAN. pp. xx, 342. London, 2015.
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This monograph, built around four articles already published in academic journals (p. ix), is a study of the revolutionary movement in North India with special reference to the crucial years between 1929 and 1931. Particular attention is paid to the career of Bhagat Singh (1907–31), a charismatic militant leader hanged in 1931 for a political crime committed nearly two years earlier, and the enduring popular cult which arose around his name. The author, Associate Professor Kama Maclean (University of New South Wales), is Editor of *South Asia* and her earlier works include *Pilgrimage and Power: The Kumbh Mela in Allahabad, 1765–1954* (2008).

The term ‘revolutionary history’ might be understood in two ways: first, as a history of revolutionary activity; but also, secondly, in the sense of a revisionary work of historiography overturning the previous understanding of the events analysed. The purpose of the book is “to reconsider the impact of the revolutionaries on nationalist agitation”. To this end it deploys oral histories and visual cultural artefacts to illuminate debates about the ‘anti-imperial struggle’ in British India (p. 1).

At the forefront of the revolutionary movement was the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army (HSRA), which was founded in September 1928 and dissolved in July 1933 (pp. 28, 106, 218). The HSRA was an outgrowth of the earlier Hindustan Republican Association (HRA, 1924–8), which aimed to establish a “Federated Republic of the United States of India by an organised and armed revolution” (p. 28). The HRA was able to attract a membership of only one hundred and accomplished little beyond a few armed robberies (p. 28). The HSRA, for its part, murdered two policemen (17 December 1928); it bombed the Legislative Assembly in Delhi (8 April 1929), but failed seriously to injure anybody; it attempted to blow up the Viceroy’s train, again failing to hit the intended target (Lord Irwin);¹ it attempted to assassinate the Governor of the Punjab (Sir Geoffrey de Montmorency, 1876–1955) and failed yet again; it issued various manifestos and documents; and it organised prison hunger strikes. The organisation was short of funds (p. 36) and weakened by arrests, its key leadership soon either dead or imprisoned; riddled with informers, all internal trust was lost, and the movement fizzled out after five years. It had failed to popularise socialism in India and it had failed to displace the Congress leadership, which it denounced as ‘bourgeois’ (p. 223). Narodniks rather than Bolsheviks, surviving HSRA personnel had leisure in gaol to reflect upon their ‘mistakes’ (p. 218); some emerged as “mature convinced communists” (p. 220).

The exact size of the HSRA’s membership cannot be reliably established; but it clearly was not very extensive (pp. 28–29). The leading light of the organisation, which sought to override caste and communal categories, was its General Secretary, Bhagat Singh (p. 28). Born in 1907 (p. 30) into a family

¹Later Lord Halifax (1881–1959). Viceroy of India, 1926–31. Foreign Secretary, UK, 1938–40. Ambassador to the USA, 1941–6.

noted for 'sedition', he was already well-known to the CID by his late teenage years because of his connections with the HRA in Kanpur and his activities in the *Naujawan Bharat Sabha*, a secularist and anti-communal Punjabi youth organisation (pp. 30, 46). Of medium height, with a thin oval face, he had an aquiline nose, bright eyes, and small beard with moustache; he wore *khaddar*. He was educated at the National College in Lahore (variously titled, pp. 43, 63–65, 85, 108). He could have married, but declined to do so because he intended to die young and had no wish to leave behind a young widow (p. 82). A master of disguise, code, and alias, he worked as a journalist and in 1926 he assisted in the compilation of a special issue on the death penalty, *Chand's Hanging Edition* (p. 61). He was arrested in 1927 accused of complicity in the bombing of a crowd in Lahore, but released for lack of evidence. He continued his organisational activities undeterred, forming the HSRA. In a revenge attack on 17 December 1928 he helped to gun down J. P. Saunders, 21, an assistant superintendent of police (p. 31). He was arrested again on 8 April 1929, after bombing the legislative assembly in Delhi. Within days of his detention he was linked to Saunders' murder, as he knew he would be. The death sentence, handed down in October 1930, was followed by international pressure for commutation (p. 37). He was hanged on 23 March 1931, along with two accomplices, Shivaram Rajguru and Sukhdev Thapar (p. 40). The corpses were burnt and the ashes were thrown midstream in the Sutlej near Ferozepore (p. 40). Rumours were spread that the corpses had been 'mutilated' (p. 42). The executions were followed by *hartal* in Lahore, Bombay, and Madras (p. 42). In Kanpur alone four hundred persons were killed in communal rioting (pp. 43, 116).

Much of the book explores the process by which Bhagat Singh became a national hero in India. The propaganda was well under way even during the twenty-three months which elapsed between his arrest and execution. A photograph of him wearing a felt hat, discussed in detail in Chapter Two, carries an iconic status similar to that enjoyed in the West by posters of Che Guevara (p. 52). Even during an age of imperial censorship and repression, there was outpouring of Bhagat Singh material – pictures, calendars, handbills, artworks, songs (all especially important in an age when literacy rates were low) – to such an extent, indeed, that it eclipsed that relating even to Gandhi (p. 15). After independence the floodgates opened, extending to film and the internet: a Google search for 'Bhagat Singh' yields no fewer than eleven million results. Interestingly, although much of his short life was spent in what is now Pakistan, his personality cult has been resisted in that country, with Islamist groups protesting against any attempt to lionise his memory (p. 45). Yet, whilst Bhagat Singh is a popular hero in India, he has been comparatively 'neglected' in professional historiography. He is also ignored by 67 standard western biographical dictionaries (except the ODNB); and there is no entry for him in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2005 edition).

Films about the freedom-fighter were released in 1954, 1963, and 1965, the latter carrying a health warning about "inadvertent deviation from actuality" (p. 47). Three more motion pictures about the great man were forthcoming in 2002 alone; alas, not one was a box office success. A further attempt, *Rang de Basanti* (2006), was more successful but failed to win the Academy 73 Award judges in the 'Best Foreign Film' category (p. 47).² To argue that the Academy judges "lacked the historical context necessary to locate the revolutionaries in an otherwise contemporary narrative" (pp. 47–48) appears to contradict the earlier statement that Bhagat Singh was 'world renowned' (p. 37). The centenary of his birth (2007) resulted in a fresh boost to the cult (p. 49).

This book raises the issue of 'martyrdom'. Bharat Singh is widely regarded as a 'martyr'; indeed, several of the films include exactly that word in their titles. One stream of opinion might question, however, whether a convicted murderer may be viewed in that light. According to this perspective genuine martyrdom involves non-violent witness to one's own beliefs upheld to the point of preferring

²Furthermore, the Bhagat Singh *genre* of film does not appear to have made any impact at the Cannes or Venice festivals.

death to recantation; in other words, the true martyr never does physical harm to anyone else, whatever the justice of the cause might be. People of this persuasion would also contend that the death penalty is never justified; or, they ought to do so, at any rate.

In 1973 Mrs Indira Gandhi unveiled a statue of Bhagat Singh in his ancestral village, Khatkarkalan (p. 10). The irony appears to be totally lost on the author; for Mrs Gandhi herself would become a victim of Sikh terrorism in due course, an event followed by the killing of thousands of innocent Sikhs in revenge. It is also noticeable that there was to be no mercy for her assassins, Satwant Singh and Kehar Singh, both hanged in 1989. Just as in the case of Bhagat Singh and his accomplices, the Indian government did not hand over the corpses, or even the cremated ashes, of those executed to their next of kin. Even more ironically, Mrs Gandhi's assassins are themselves now regarded as 'martyrs'. A film about her death, *Kaum De Heere* (2014), has been suppressed in her homeland. It would appear that the methods of independent India are somewhat closer to those of imperial India than Indians themselves might care to admit; and that the current establishment is not quite so keen on 'martyrs' when they themselves are the victims of the said 'martyrs'.

It might be observed, further, that the author's appeal for a dispassionate understanding of revolutionary activity (p. 38) appears to desert her when it is a question of a "discourse of condemnation" of the imperial power (e.g. pp. 13, 19, 23, 32, 43, 45, 48, 57, 102, 103, 229, 232). Similarly, the British press engages in 'sensationalism' (p. 192) but this characterisation is never applied to the nationalist counterpart.

The "core argument" of the book is that "the presence of the revolutionaries on the political landscape during the crucial interwar years served to radicalise the Congress which, in turn, injected a fresh urgency into the slow British project of constitutional reform" (pp. 20–21). Militant activity forced Congress into more extreme positions, such as demanding full independence rather than dominion status. The book problematises the dominance of non-violence in nationalist historiography. The situation was much more fluid than that. The HSRA was, in a sense, an unacknowledged 'military wing' of Congress, enabling the latter's leaders to preserve their 'non-violent' credentials whilst at the same time pressurising the British along the lines of "If you don't make concessions to us, you will have to deal with them" (Chapter Six, 'Gandhi or Balraj'). The author demonstrates that both Nehru's, father and son, whilst theoretically in favour of non-violence, were all along contributing to HSRA funds, ostensibly for humanitarian reasons (pp. 150–151, 176, 224). Motilal was by no means discomfited when presented with evidence that the money had been used, instead, for the purchase of weaponry (p. 150); whilst Jawaharlal (1889–1964) later explained that it was impolitic for a prime minister, "even if he was in the thick of the revolutionary movement" in his youth [*sic*], to own it publicly (p. 222).

One figure who does emerge from this book with integrity intact is Mohandas Gandhi. His assessment of the Bhagat Singh case is fair. In a resolution moved by Jawaharlal Nehru, but actually drafted by Gandhi (p. 200):

The Congress, while disassociating itself from and disapproving of political violence in any shape or form, places on record its admiration of the bravery and sacrifice of the late Sardar Bhagat Singh and his comrades Sriyuts Sukhdev and Rajguru and mourns with the bereaved families the loss of these lives.^[3] The Congress is of the opinion that Government have lost the golden opportunity of promoting goodwill between the two nations, admittedly held to be essential at this juncture, and

³But the Congress did not appear to mourn with the bereaved relatives of J. P. Saunders. No doubt the family would have gained immense comfort and consolation from the notion that the murder was, in the author's words, "an act performed with relative detachment and with discernible regret" (p. 230).

of winning over to the method of peace the party which, being driven to despair, resorts to political violence.

In other words, “The deed was condemned. The spirit of bravery and sacrifice was praised”, (p. 203). Spot on. George Orwell noted in one of his last writings (1949) that “the gentleness with which he [Gandhi] was nearly always handled [by the British] was due partly to the feeling that he was useful” and could even be regarded as ‘our man’.⁴ No wonder that when a statue was unveiled in London on 14 March 2015, it should have depicted the *mahatma* rather than the revolutionary.⁵ <avmhorton@hotmail.com>

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KARACHI – ORDERED DISORDER AND THE STRUGGLE FOR THE CITY. By LAURENT GAYER. pp. 336. London, Hurst, 2014.

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Laurent Gayer’s magnificently evocative account of politics and urban violence in Karachi comes after a spate of recent reinterpretations of Pakistan as a society and polity. Rather than following the time-honoured tradition of emphasising failures of one form or another – and of predicting the country’s imminent collapse – authors such as Anatol Lieven, Naveeda Khan, Ayesha Jalal and Ian Talbot have stressed that despite its serious and many problems, Pakistan still ‘works’. Even if survival constitutes a ‘paradox’, as Christophe Jaffrelot put it most recently, there is some kind of method in the madness. Gayer, when surveying the more specific paradox of Karachi – Pakistan’s most populous and economically important city – speaks of ‘ordered disorder’. Tens of thousands of its inhabitants may have been killed over the last five years, and the city is divided into ethnic no-go areas with their own paramilitary overlords, yet it still attracts millions of new residents in search of a better life, contributes the lion’s share of income tax returns to the Pakistani economy and offers a glitzy consumer culture and arts scene to its most affluent residents. The all-important point is that organised political violence – although too fluid and unpredictable to be called a ‘system’ – still follows a pattern that actors can discern, adapt to and even manipulate to their advantage. Karachi is not a city in a state of disintegration, nor a city at war – and it is unlikely that this will change in the immediate or medium-term future.

This at least, is Gayer’s stated argument, elegantly supported by a wide range of social theories. The kind of conclusion that flows naturally from his account, and the way it is written and ‘packaged’ is a lot darker, however. There is a lot of despair and very little hope in the pieces of Urdu literature that Gayer often cites and interprets to set the context for the several hundred interviews that provide the empirical bedrock of the book. An alarmingly high proportion of his informants meet a violent death not long after been recorded by the author. This strangely aestheticised sense of danger makes this book so interesting and readable, an atmosphere heightened by the constant presence of Urdu –

⁴ *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters* (London, 1970), volume IV, pp. 523–4. And perhaps it was just as well that Gandhi never had to test the efficacy of ‘non-violence’ against an imperial power such as wartime Japan. It is also noteworthy that, whereas the HSRA had a membership barely reaching three figures, the all-volunteer Indian Army numbered 2.5 million in 1945 (*JRAS*, July 2015:526).

⁵ BBC News (online), 14 March 2015; accessed at 1149h BST on Saturday 18 July 2015.