



## The Last Chapter of the Indian Legion<sup>1</sup>

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In comparison with the formation and development of the Indian National Army in Southeast Asia, the impact of the Indian Legion during the Second World War in Europe, both in the academia and popular perception has received little attention. While there are a few overviews, specific aspects of the Indian Legion have not been addressed adequately. Military history, especially, has not engaged with this area. Although archival material in Britain and France is yet to be tapped, the files on the Legion held at the Federal Archives in Freiburg<sup>2</sup> and the memoirs of the members of the Legion along with the rich body of sources on its founder, Subhas Chandra Bose (respectfully named Netaji; 1897-1945), can pave the way towards a reconstruction of aspects of the history of the Indian Legion.

This chapter is an attempt at such a reconstruction of the Indian Legion's stationing in France from summer of 1943 up to its withdrawal late in autumn of 1944. A defining factor in the choice of this period was the fact that publications by German and Indian members of the Indian Legion, on account of their point of entry into the Legion as well as their membership of different units, allow a good overview of the deployment of the Indian Legion in France along with other complementary and available material. On the initial recruitment of Indian prisoners of war and their training to become the Indian Legion's soldiers see Kuhlmann's contribution in this volume.

Individual points of view and personal experience gathered from above sources for the history of the Legion during this period can thus be supplemented and emended with complementary sources. Although the current availability of sources does not allow for a precise reconstruction of its deployment and retreat, a survey and critical analysis of relevant events and issues for the said period is certainly possible. The early history of the Legion, and so far well documented aspects such as recruitment, religious practices, provisions and maintenance, lan-



guage issues or the temporary deployment of one company in Italy shall however not be discussed here.

### **The Indian Legion in France**

The first and second battalions of the Indian Legion were transferred from Belgium to Holland in June 1943. Along with the third battalion, which had in the interim been formed in Germany, the Legion, which now had the strength of a regiment, was soon deployed in France in autumn 1943. According to the Legion files, in choosing a new location, the Free India Centre and the High Command of the Wehrmacht (OKW) had the following considerations:

The Legion was under no circumstances to be deployed in missions which could be said to solely serve German military interests, and to expose the Legion as an instrument of Netaji to decimation, as was possible in a modern war through air strikes, was also to be prevented" (BA/MA 1984: II/60).

In other sources it is stated that reports sent to the army High Command of growing activities of foreign agents in Holland and Belgium resulted in the transfer of the Legion to France (BA/MA1984: III/9). A remote possibility that the Legion would be able to withstand an invasion in Holland, and a memorandum on the rising instances of tuberculosis among Indian legionaries owing to adverse weather conditions are also cited as further reasons (BA/MA 1984: III/84; Ganpuley 1959:144). Finally, the relatively scant military impact of the Legion and its assessment as a risk factor may have played a defining role in deciding the new posting.<sup>3</sup> In any case, an invasion by the Allies on the southernmost tip of the Siegfried Line was most unlikely.

The Legion was stationed to guard an adjoining densely forested coastal strip, which, as part of the Atlantic Wall, stretched over 50 to 60 kilometres to the west of Bordeaux between the Gironde estuary to the north along the Bay of Biscay, up to the Bay of Arcachon to the south (Hartog 1991: 105). The regiment headquarters were at Lacanau, almost at the same level as the second battalion, north of which was the first battalion stationed at Lac de Carcans, and to the south in Lege was the third battalion. Companies attached to the respective battalions took turns in the occupation of the large and small bunkers directly along the coastline. These fortifications, which in military terminology are referred to as pockets of resistance, were each occupied by one or two groups under the leadership of a German Sergeant or Sergeant Major, and the personnel were replaced at regular inter-



vals. Housing for soldiers was organised in forest camps, cantonments, and in private homes. The Legion, including its activities, was subject to the authority of the German Army Commander in the West.

In the beginning, an important task assigned to the Indian Legion was the expansion of the military station. This task was compounded by concomitant phenomena (such as shifting sands, sand floes), and entailed hard labour.<sup>4</sup> Along with the expansion and maintenance of defence positions, legionaries were trained to handle searchlights, flame throwers, and to service coastal batteries. These legionaries had to deal with heavy weapons only once briefly, when they were moved from other divisions to the inadequately equipped bunker locations of the Legion for an inspection by Field Marshal Rommel, Commander of Army Group B, and remained there for a few days. War prisoners from Africa were also used for the expansion of the army station and for other heavy labour (Rose 1989: 50-1, 69f.).

Information on current events, news transmission, and the supervision of cultural propaganda was carried out in the Indian Legion publication *Bhaiband*, and through its eponymous broadcaster. The publication was put together by specialists such as Ernst Bannerth and three Indian colleagues and published weekly out of Bordeaux. Paul Thieme, Kurth Hoffmann, and Eugen Rose later took over the editorial management of the publication (Kuhlmann 2003: 298).<sup>5</sup> Set up solely for the Indian Legion, the radio station began operations in Lacanau over May and June of 1944, but had to stop broadcasts shortly thereafter, and was blown up on 14 August during the retreat in the same year.<sup>6</sup> The broadcasts could be heard in the bunkers and pockets of resistance with the help of compatible equipment. Especially popular were musical programmes, put together by the broadcaster, partly with BBC broadcasts recorded in Paris and dubbed for the purpose. Germans controlled the programmes, and Indian legionaries functioned as announcers.

Recruiting for the Indian Legion was also carried out among Indian prisoners of war in France. If we presume the stated strength of the Legion at 1187 members in 1942 in Germany to be correct, also bearing in mind the addition of more companies leading to a total of three battalions by April 1943 before the transfer to Holland, the scope and significance of this effort on French soil becomes quite clear, as the presence of Indians among the ranks of the Legion grew to 2593 in January 1945 (BA/MA 1984: I/64, 66). These prisoners of war were brought to individual companies from the camp at Epinal where they



would be inducted by their compatriots. For this reason, they would stay on site for two to three weeks, where they were at times subjected to pressure (Bannerth 1996: 387),<sup>7</sup> before those not recruited returned via Bordeaux to the prisoner of war camps under German surveillance (Hartog 1991:106; Rose 1989: 118-20). Those Legion members who were considered disruptive were brought to Germany. Along with other Indians from Königsbrück labelled as instigators, they joined a special company stationed at Naundorf near Ortrand from the summer of 1943. They were placed under arrest in arduous conditions and had to labour in fatigue parties.<sup>8</sup>

It is stated that the percentage of Indian prisoners of war who decided to join the Indian Legion in France was between 20 and 50 per cent. They were assured that they would retain their status as POWs, an assurance that was often a deciding factor in their joining the Indian Legion. This was also a way to guarantee that the allowances paid to their families would not be affected. The status of the Indian Legion's members, who had been taken captive by the German and Italian armies as members of the British forces and had entered the Legion, was different from that of those who had decided to join the Legion as former students or trainees. Unlike the latter, and contrary to established conventions with regard to the British, they were treated as POWs and were allowed to correspond with their families (Hartog 1991:73; Rose 1989: 100). They were subject to censorship at the company level, that is, without the senders' knowledge their letters were opened by interpreters before they were brought to Division 1c of the regiment's headquarters. They were then evaluated for a monthly report on the morale in the Legion before they were directed to the addressees (Rose 1989: 76; Hartog 1991: 128).

As supposed prisoners of war, members of the Legion had the right to receive food parcels from the Red Cross. These parcels sent by the British Red Cross, which grew in significance with the progress of the war as supply conditions worsened, contained, among other things, cigarettes, chocolate, condensed milk, tea, spices, meat pies, biscuits, and preserved fruit. Their withdrawal from German POW-camps also partly aided the decision to join the Indian Legion.<sup>9</sup> They also served to discipline members of the Legion even after the deployment to France (Fisher 2015: 186). The question as to how long these food parcels – their delicacies highly valued even in the eyes of German legionaries – continued to be delivered, has varying answers in the sources. The arrival of the Allies on 6 June 1944 seems to have temporarily interrupted supplies, since the Red Cross parcels that had not been



delivered were found in Ruffec during the retreat of the Legion towards the end of August.

Whether the supplies continued remained a contested question in the context of the retreat of the Indian Legion, however, elsewhere we find evidence that they were still delivered with a significantly reduced inventory as a result of bombings (Hartog 1991:139; Rose 1989: 193). Moral support for the legionaries also came from the British Red Cross in the form of book shipments. Wagonloads of book shipments dotted with stamps of approval by the OKW arrived, containing dictionaries and grammars, epics such as the Mahabharata, and novels in various Indian languages and in English. With the help of these, the staff of the Indian Legion staff was able to build a library, which was eventually destroyed during the retreat.

There are different assessments of the equation between the Indians and the German support staff. With reference to the challenge that lay before the instructors and officers, some German legionaries have pointed out that "mutual understanding and respect between Indians and Germans" was possible in order to maintain the stability of the Legion till the point of capitulation. The equations between both sides is referred to as "consistently unproblematic", and continued to be so till the time of the retreat (BA/MA 1984: II/91; Rose 1989: 48).

Other members were of the opinion that any problems, resulting from bringing together former Indian members of the army and German personnel who were often inadequately prepared, were only to be witnessed shortly before they were stationed in France (Hartog 2013: 45). In a radio address delivered on 30 September 1944 during the retreat, Regiment Commander Krappe categorically praised the Legion, that

smashed the allied cordon in South West France and heroically fighting made their way to the ordered new positions. [...] In perfect marching order, with all their weapons in place and with a very small number of casualties they reached its new destination. (Krappe 1996: 408-09).

There are also instances of a wholeheartedly positive assessment from the Indian side (Ganpuley 1959: 410-11). However, these impressions in no way correspond to the reality of the retreat, as argued below. Legion members have pointed to differences that were apparent right from the beginning, which only grew as the retreat progressed, and of which even the British were aware towards the beginning of August 1944.<sup>10</sup>



Even Indian legionaries acknowledge that holding together a 'miniature India' in the form of the Legion was no easy task. The presence of Subhas Chandra Bose in 1942 as an icon is said to have been particularly important in the relations between Germans and Indians. German instructors in the Legion were seen as indispensable by Indian legionaries, but they also felt that the OKW and the Free India Centre "overstuffed us with instructors and interpreters". In their opinion, the "bossy attitude of the Germans", led to the impression among Indians "that the Germans were not simply acting as instructors but they tried to act as our master", but that a "change of masters" was not deemed acceptable (Mangat 1986: 194). The military defeats of Germany, coupled with Subhas Chandra Bose's departure from Germany on 8 February 1943, can be seen to have led to a feeling of dissatisfaction and disappointment among Indian Legion members.

Partially responsible for this mood and a "root cause of discontent" may also have been the regulation that postings in the Legion were determined exclusively on the basis of duration of service in the Legion after fulfilling other requirements, irrespective of rank in the British Army. The widely publicised induction of the first twelve Indian legionaries and two doctors as officers took place at the same time as that of German officers on 1 October 1943 in Lacanau, where the regiment was headquartered. The Indian officers participated in celebrations marking the declaration of the Provisional Republic of Free India on 15 November 1943 in Berlin (Rose 1989: 120-3; Mangat 1986: 164-5).

Labelled as the 'Indianisation' of the Legion, the gradual replacement of German personnel by Indians in the lower ranks and in administrative services, which came to a halt with the beginning of the retreat, was evidently accompanied by the revival of the demand for a consideration of ranks on which legionaries had served in the British Army, and led to tensions. Naming of Indians as officers led to a perception of "dualism on the part of the leadership" and to developments that bordered on mutiny.<sup>11</sup> Till the end, while a majority of the lower ranks, most administrative positions, and officers' positions were occupied by Indian officials, German legionaries served as company heads, commanders of battalions, and as regiment staff (BA/MA 1984: II/91).

The experiences of a young Austrian, who was inducted into the eleventh company of the Indian Legion reflect the equations between Indian and German legionaries from the point of view of an "ordinary soldier". He speaks of privileges available to the German side which



were denied to Indian legionaries holding the same military rank. Indian legionaries were treated “either condescendingly or harshly” and German legionaries were in turn “tactless and overbearing” in their behaviour towards their Indian colleagues. In relation to their looming defeat, “the Germans had become thoroughly suspicious of the Indians. [...] There were several German officers who acted as the ring-leaders in this anti-Indian propaganda” (Bharati 1961: 56, 60).

### **The Legion, the French Population, and the Resistance**

The time the Legion spent on the Atlantic coast seems initially to have been bearable. In competitions with teams from neighbouring German units, the Legion’s hockey teams were unbeatable. The finals took place in Paris and were met with interest not only in the civilian population, but also drew the attention of the Free India Centre in distant Berlin, which for the last time before the end of the war sent their highest representatives to France (Mangat 1986: 163; Rose 1989: 112-4). The Indian Legion was well provided for and did not indicate any instances of scarcity in comparison with the civilian population.

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The equation between the Indian Legion as a part of foreign occupying forces and the civilian population is described in the beginning in terms of “mutual goodwill” and “entirely frictionless”. There was no sense of animosity towards Germans or Indians. Members and sympathisers of the French Resistance were known to the regiment staff, which also had the responsibility to function as local headquarters in the East. German legionaries were often housed with civilians who also performed roles of workmen and cleaning staff for the Legion and who were known as sympathisers of the Resistance. The civilian population had braved war and foreign occupation, but had known how to face both with a certain “equanimity, even a degree of cheerfulness” (Rose 1989: 54, 60).

Quite early on, setting up road blocks to carry out identity checks was a task assigned to the Legion, which, on account of their activities, was subject to surveillance by the Allies as well as the Resistance (Mangat 1986: 174-6).<sup>12</sup> With the arrival of the Allies in Normandy on 6 June 1944, and the advance of American troops there were increased activities of the Resistance. Among the direct consequences of the change in military circumstances was the detachment of German units from coastal defence. For the Indian Legion this meant a spatial expansion of their posting. Further, the Resistance became a direct



opponent of the Indian Legion, and fighting them became one of the Legion's duties. It is not clear whether the Legion was expected to protect withdrawing German troops, or whether individual battalions or companies were deployed when required to accompany German units. An added task was the arrest of French civilians for the purpose of slave labour.

There are instances of reports on the deployment of the Indian Legion's units against forces of the Resistance on two occasions towards the beginning of the withdrawal from the Atlantic coast. In the early days of July 1944, the second battalion was transferred to Casteljalous, southeast of Bordeaux. Deployment in the area around Mont-de-Marsan did not lead to combat operations or losses on either side, because Resistance fighters had received information on the deployment on time. "Little fighting was done but the Indians were given the opportunity to loot and it was the looting that appealed to them" (Bannerth 1996: 387; Hartog 1991: 136). One campaign that did lead to significant losses for the Resistance was the campaign in Medoc, where the Resistance had a base in the forest of Hourtin, and which was being supplied by American aircrafts with equipment and food. Before the captured Frenchmen were brought to Bordeaux, they had to bury their fallen fellow combatants in mass graves (Rose 1989: 73-4).<sup>13</sup>

The task of delivering those who had been assigned to forced labour by the Wehrmacht proved to be a difficult one for the Legion. In order to fulfill this responsibility, legionaries looked for these people in their houses and apartments and took them along. In order to prevent these forced labourers from defecting to the Resistance, short distance trains were stopped and searched. The Legion also participated in the capture of those Frenchmen who were assigned to forced labour in France (Rose 1989: 114-6).

There is insufficient evidence for a reconstruction of armed hostilities with the Resistance in available sources on specific combat operations and losses suffered on either side for the period from the beginning of the withdrawal of the Indian Legion on 15 August 1944 till the crossing of the French border. Legion files show only three documents which explicitly refer to the withdrawal of the Legion from France. These are supplemented by corresponding passages in other documents and publications by German and Indian legionaries (BA/MA 1984: III/49 ff; Hartog 1991: 139f.). While on one occasion there is a reference to concrete instances, which however appear in sources only





once, such as the loss of 320 legionaries as a result of attacks by US planes between Angoulême und Poitiers (Bharati 1961: 422) others only refer to events, without date or location, and without more detailed descriptions of the situation. A secret verbal pact between the respective leadership of the Legion and the Resistance, in which they had each agreed to respect the other side for the duration of the Legion's presence in France, is similarly only cited in one Indian source.<sup>14</sup> In the absence of other evidence, this version can be considered as doubtful as the one that argues that the decision to fight the Resistance may have served as a cause for the desired withdrawal from France (Bannerth 1996: 387).

Large parts of the Indian Legion were able to separately cover the first stretch of the retreat by train, that is, between Bordeaux and Poitiers. According to Indian sources, there was a pitched battle during a stopover in the city of Ruffec, in which the enemy side "left behind hundreds of dead in the jungle and the rest had to flee" (Mangat 1986: 181). Between the 17 and 24 August, many captured Resistance fighters lost their lives. The offer made by one captured Major in the Resistance, that he be set free in exchange for five Germans in captivity, was declined (Rose 1989: 128-33; Bannerth 1996: 388). The invitation to German legionaries of the twelfth company on their way to Poitiers for a "farewell dinner" by a Frenchman in Angoulême may have been the only instance of its kind (Hartog 1991: 138).

The Indian Legion had been assigned the task of securing streets and bridges around Poitiers and was able to hold the traffic routes free for German units streaming back. In Poitiers it was still possible to rely on the ample reserve supplies of the Wehrmacht, and of which sections of the civilian population were also able to partake for a while as a result of independent initiative on the part of the Legion (Rose 1989: 14). Since the Legion did not have its own vehicles and could not travel beyond Poitiers by train, it was constantly dependent on confiscated heavy transport vehicles, personal cars, horse carriages, and bicycles, wherein "all requisitions were made in an orderly manner, that is, with valid receipts" (BA/MA: II/66). Limited transportation required leaving behind anything that was superficial or not absolutely necessary. Till this point, the Legion comprised three battalions, each with three infantry companies, one machine gun company, one infantry gun company, a pioneer company, three battalion staffs and the regiment leadership with a signals platoon, and the field howitzer company only recently set up in France. The total strength lay at about 3000 persons (Ganpuley 1959: 159).



The retreat beyond Poitiers on August 27 and 28 was rendered difficult on account of air raids and shelling as well as on account of the activities of Resistance fighters. Sources give an account of battles and resulting losses among Resistance fighters, civilians, and Indian legionaries during the "nervous weeks of the French retreat", without, however, creating a more comprehensive picture of the events of those days and weeks. The retreat as a consequence of the course the war had taken, and the uncertain future continued to have an impact on the psychological condition of German as well as Indian legionaries against the background of widespread pamphleteering with its call for desertion.<sup>15</sup> They had heard of the liberation of Paris even before leaving Poitiers. Their retreat could often not be carried out during the day, and torn down street signs, blackened milestones, and missing maps added to their difficulties. They were unable to cover more than 30 to 50 kilometres a day, whereby marching columns were put together on the basis of their mobility.

Initially, the stretch in the direction of Chateauroux was captured. Areas leading to it passed through the forested regions of the Departments Indre across Bonneuil-Matours, La Roche-Posay, Martizay, Vendœuvres and Buzancais. There were several battles with Resistance fighters, who, given their light weaponry, resorted to barricades and ambushes. Information to that effect and on the losses suffered by the Legion and the opposition is to be found in German sources (Rose 1989: 154-8; Hartog: 142-6). Since these are few in number, they can only provide limited concrete information about the course of events as these battles unfolded, their causes, and their outcome. We have the following account in the Legion files:

After the war, there was an attempt to attribute all the destruction in the wake of the retreat to the legionaries, but where on earth will you find troops who allow their way to be blocked, allow themselves to be shot at in an ambush without retaliation! The dead and the wounded from the ranks of the volunteers speak volumes (BA/MA 1984: II/70).

Reliable information on numbers and an overview of the losses suffered on both sides during the retreat is not available so far. Witnesses have testified that at the time, Resistance fighters and gendarmes that had been captured by units of the Legion, among them also those that had been handed over to them by other German units, were set free in the course of the retreat (Hartog 1991: 146-8; Rose 1989: 154-8). A direct fallout of this, the generalisation "the battle with the resistance groups in places where captives were taken,



actually progressed in a humane fashion” and that “freedom was given back to them” (Hartog 1991: 148), is not corroborated by available sources.

Available information on the behaviour of the Indian Legion towards the civilian population and the Resistance during retreat is quite contradictory. The uncertainty was evidently so great, “hat no one dared take any action against the French, at least not while in transit.” It was simply, “carry on, just carry on [...]”. At the same time “an ominous hatred for everything French” was to be seen among Indian legionaries, which led to various attacks. There was no attempt on the part of the regiment leadership to curb this, for this would have “fuelled the feeling of reluctance felt by the Indians vis-à-vis the Germans” (Rose 1989: 156, 159).

Along with the looting, there were also instances of rape of French women by Indian legionaries. Details in regard to this matter are incomplete.<sup>16</sup> In one source, three cases are named, and they were dealt with by a drum-head court martial. The sentencing was varied, from death by firing squad, to arduous week long marches with backpacks, to acquittal. In two of these cases, there are supplementary details about the immediate circumstances, and the trial. Evidently, the Legion leadership waived the public shooting of the Indian condemned to death by firing squad on 5 September 1944 in Luzy, not announcing the same among the ranks of the Indian Legion (Franzen 1981: 102; also Kuhlmann in this volume).<sup>17</sup>

An allegation made elsewhere in that context, that the Legion leadership took a lenient view of these crimes, comes across as mistaken in the accounts by Legion members. From other reports, it becomes clear that in view of the enemy position, not every wrongdoing by Indian members of the Legion against women members of the civilian population was pursued (Hauner 1981: 588; Rose 1989: 160-2). The wrongdoings by a few Indian legionaries compromised the reputation of the Legion in the eyes of the French civilian population and also had a lasting impact on the course of the retreat. On 29 September 1944, when *Le Figaro* published reports on the looting and rapes by members of the Indian Legion, the Free India Centre in Berlin reacted with a radio broadcast and a press conference, in which they had three Indian legionaries report on their heroic military feats (Kuhlmann 2003: 335).

German legionaries blew up the printing press in Chateauroux, which worked for the Resistance, without taking any staff captive.



Commanding officers of the Legion resisted the deployment of the first battalion along with another German unit that had been ordered to blow up the steel and armaments facilities owned by Schneider-Creuzot (BA/MA 1984: III/9-10, Rose 1989: 163). At Dun-sur-Auron near Bourges, pitched battles with the French opponents took place for the first time, which resulted in the death of Lieutenant Ali Khan, and in which officers, sergeants, and other teams of the Legion were wounded. In the enemy camp, members of the Resistance, and 21 Indians, who were fighting on their side, were captured, and handed over to a German unit. The Berry Canal was crossed in the course of the night, before Dun-sur-Auron was burnt down.

After Sancoins, where Lieutenant Ali Khan was laid to rest on the following day (Mangat 1986:183, BA/MA 1984: II/70), the Indian Legion split up and marched mostly in two columns through the night towards Luzy via Moulins and Decize. From there, in order to escape the enemy advances from the South, they proceeded in forced marches to Champlitte-et-le-Prelot via Autun, Beaune, and Dijon. In these, the Legion had to suffer heavy losses, and, in addition, lost about a hundred Indians to desertion (Fisher 2015: 189). Between Autun and Beaune, along with accompanying German units, the Legion was cut off by enemy forces, resulting in a loss of 40 men, who either lost their lives, or were wounded or captured. The Legion set up their local headquarters at Beune, while scattered German units passed through the city without stopping. They did not participate in battles with advancing armoured units towards the north of Beune, which could be temporarily stopped by deploying the Legion (BA/MA 1984: II/71, Hartog 1991: 150-2; Mangat 1986: 186-8). In and around Champlitte-et-le-Perlot, all units of the Legion were again united, and rested for a few days. A court martial of field officers sentenced the signal officer of the small town to death for attempting to persuade an Indian legionary to desert (Rose 1989: 176-7).

The departure from Champlitte-et-le-Prelot took place on 10 September. The Legion reached the little city of Plombières-les-Bains via Jussey. From here, with available vehicles a short detour was taken to Epinal, which had not yet been occupied. Here, provisions were procured for the Legion from what remained of the stores of the POW camps. The occupation of Epinal by American troops a short while later and the consequently endangered supplies forced the Legion to retreat further towards Remiremont, which they reached on 13 September. In accordance with the strategic concerns of the OKW, there was some



consideration of the defence of the Vosges, for which units of the Legion were put to digging trenches.

At the same time, along with other German groups, other units were caught up in defending themselves against advancing armoured groups. Barring a few exceptions, the Legion had to be separated from their motor vehicles, and marched largely with horse carts, in bicycle convoys, followed by low-flying aircraft, towards Elsass via Gerardmer, where they reached Colmar on 16 September 1944. After resting for the night, they travelled via Strasbourg and Haguenau to the camp at Oberhoffen-sur-Moder, which they reached towards the end of September. Near Haguenau, the Legion was able to circumvent the unavoidable occupation of a reception camp anticipated by concerned commanders. Like other Wehrmacht units, the Legion was also not allowed to cross the Rhine till this point.

In Oberhoffen-sur-Moder a more regulated life in the garrison began for the legionaries. Contact was established with Königsbrück in order to learn which of the units jettisoned during the retreat had arrived there, and which would join the Legion at Oberhoffen-sur-Moder. The Legion's equipment was enhanced, they received winter clothes, and were then engaged in fortification and security related work. The policy of replacing German personnel through Indian legionaries was partially revived. The growing discussions on the immediate future of the legionaries in view of the war situation which presented itself as particularly disadvantageous for the Germans and the axis powers were muffled by the impending inclusion of the Legion in the Waffen-SS. Like all other foreign volunteer units on the German side, they were subject to the Waffen-SS. There are divergent accounts by German legionaries in this regard (Franzen 1981: 104; Hartog 1991:162-4; Rose 1989:187-90; Fisher 2015: 189f.). The order pertaining to this assignment was dated 18 January 1944, the transfer to the Waffen-SS was ordered for 8 August 1944, but which did not take place on account of the retreat that began a week later, and was reported on 4 October 1944 in the *Bhaiband* as an announcement that came into effect from 15 August 1944.

The immediate consequences evidently varied, apart from the change of uniform, which around 300 largely Muslim legionaries refused. A large section of Indian legionaries whose opinion on the matter was not sought, but who did wish to know, if and when Subhas Chandra Bose may have agreed to such a step, successfully protested against the replacement of the Regiment Commander Krappe. German



support staff did not willingly make the application to join the SS. They declined entry into the service record and the tattooing of the blood group, but did agree to wear the new uniform (Kuhlmann 2003: 333). A positive assessment of the new assignation on behalf of all Indian legionaries seems questionable, and seems to have remained an exception.<sup>18</sup>

These weeks of a peaceful life in a garrison came to an end with the news that units of the third and seventh US Army were moving towards Strasbourg. The entire Legion was assigned the task of setting up anti-tank barriers and left Oberhoffen-sur-Moder in the middle of November after American units had reached Strasbourg. The Rhine was crossed in the night at Seltz, when an Indian truck driver lost his life. The Legion was back in Germany. From the area around Rastatt and Brühl they reached Bretten near Pforzheim in two day long marches, where they spent a few weeks of peace and recovery in Bretten and neighbouring villages from 29 November. On 23 December 1944 began the Indian Legion's transfer to the army camp at Heuberg, where seven Indian legionaries died of consumption (Fisher 2015: 190).

Heuberg was left on 15 April 1945 without provisions. Available accounts for the few remaining days before capitulation (Rose 1989: 190-6; Hartog 1991: 166-7) describe the disappearance of the German officer corps and most Indian officers, the endeavour to avoid being taken captive by the French, and the futile attempt made by about 500 Indian legionaries to reach Switzerland or Austria. The latter landed in French captivity on the afternoon of 30 April 1945 in Allgäu (Fisher 2015: 190-4). The Indian Legion, Regiment 950 of the German Wehrmacht, had ceased to exist.

### **Desertion by Indian and German Legionaries**

In the memory of German legionaries, the deployment of the Indian Legion in France appears as a section of military history with "mostly bright colours" because Indians and Germans had begun to "soon feel at home" in that country (Hartog 1991: 106). This seems to be also true for desertion. Yet, while on the one hand the fact of desertion by legionaries is simply denied, elsewhere, on the other hand, instances of desertion are mentioned. Given the then conditions, and the sheer numbers of soldiers, there is no overview of these in any of the few autobiographical testimonies or in the files on the Indian Legion which



have survived. So far undetected material may shed some light on this rather obscure history.

However, even though the number of cases of desertion was small in comparison to the total strength of the Legion, the assertion made by German legionaries that "the Legion as a whole could be led back to the German border", and that during the march back there were "no desertions by legionaries from among their troops" (BA/MA 1984: I/83), does not correspond to facts. Where desertions are mentioned, the cited numbers are inaccurate and contradictory, for instance, while legionaries state in their publications that "during the retreat from France, from among the Indians, there were only four deserters", other sources mention "up to 40 deserters" in just the case of the third battalion (Rose 1989: 37, BA/MA 1984: III/92). Reports, however, do not support the conclusion that all deserters "had to pay with their lives instead of being received by a friendly welcome by the enemy" (Ganpuley 1959: 166).

The desertion by a group of Germans and Indians during the retreat of the Legion from France deserves attention as this collective initiative points to forces in the Legion that must have engaged with the viability of 'insubordination' for some time. They may have discussed desertion amongst each other, and upon adequate preparation used the first available opportunity after the arrival of the Allies. To what extent this understanding between German and Indian legionaries in the run up to desertion bears the character of a conspiracy cannot be answered conclusively on the basis of the available sources. There is only one incident that there may have been a collective plan "to destroy the Headquarters and to hand over all the material to the enemy and to defect with the entire unit to the enemy's ranks at the first opportunity" (Fisher 2015: 187).

After suffering heavy losses in battle, the Legion arrived at the city of Ruffec, which was located between Angonlemma and Poitiers and set up camp outside the city.<sup>19</sup> In July and August 1944 skirmishes with the Resistance occurred several times in that region accompanied by looting and shooting of Resistance commanders which, however, did not find consent among all Indian legionaries (Bannerth 1996: 388).

A group of German officers, Indian soldiers, and sergeants deserted the Legion in August 1944. The regiment doctor, Ernst Koch-Grünberg, had established contact with the Resistance through a French doctor, and had worked out an escape plan with him. Along with Ernst Koch-



Grünberg, the regiment interpreter and publisher of *Bhaiband*, Ernst Bannerth, an adjutant of the first battalion, Heinrich von Trott zu Solz and a German soldier, along with a group of Indians left the Legion. Among the Indians were Bannerth's colleagues who helped publish the Legion newspaper, Hasan Beg, Thakur, and Jamil Ahmad, and sergeants and sergeant majors Izmat Ullah, Indar Bahadur Singh and Jamadar Chaudhuri.<sup>20</sup>

As will be seen from the quotes in the following paragraphs, the exact number of deserting Indian legionaries remains unknown, although the number is sometimes placed at 25 (Rose 1989: 45, Hartog 1991: 140, Fisher 2015: 187). They could not all have left Ruffec together, because Koch-Grünberg's group only had three cars and they were able to cross the city limits after 8 pm only because Koch-Grünberg, as regiment doctor, stated that he was travelling in order to attend to an accident. There does not seem to have been a collective desertion at one time. On the one hand, 22 or 23 August 1944 cited as they day on which desertion took place (Oesterheld 2000: 219; Kuhlmann 2003: 339). Bannerth, however, states that he left the regiment in Bernac with 13 Indians no earlier than on 28 August (Bannerth 1996: 388).

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After meeting with representatives of the Resistance in an old chapel, they were brought to the chateau in Bourg-L'Archambault and placed under strict surveillance. The German members of the Legion were placed in a French POW-camp. Regarding further developments, available sources give varying information on the fate of the Indian legionaries who had deserted. On 21 September 1944, the Indians were driven away in four trucks, of which one truck remained in a location that had been destroyed by the Wehrmacht, where there had been attacks by Indian legionaries against the civilian population there. The Indians in this truck were then handed over to Resistance fighters the next day, and as recalled by a former Resistance commander, it were

[...] these Indians, who were brought to Poitiers and executed. That ought not to have happened under any circumstances, but one must see that the local Maquis had come into contact with these Indians under unpleasant circumstances. The Maquisards are not always easy to control. (Breustedt 1991)

This version is corroborated through the recollections of a former legionary:





These 25 deserters first fell into the hands of the Communist Maquis who treated them very decently and promised to hand them over to the British or American Army which was closing up from behind. But soon a larger group of anarchist Maquis entered the area and took hold of them. This anarchist group of Maquis had come down from Poitiers where several Indian soldiers had in the past committed atrocities (rape etc.). Moreover, in Ruffec itself three high ranking officers of the Maquis movement had been captured by the 2. I.N.A. Company and Court martialled, and shot on the spot. (Fisher 2015: 189)

According to a German officer in the Legion, "in the last days of August, along with German prisoners of war, 18 Indian soldiers were shot publicly without trial or verdict".<sup>21</sup> A French eyewitness recollects 22 September 1994 in Poitiers as he saw it:

A truck with about 20 or 25 Indians arrived [...] and stopped about 50 metres from the balcony of the town hall. Everyone, and there were many people present in the square, who was returning from work, looked at the Indians. It only lasted a few seconds, and a soldier of the FFI [Forces Francaises de l'Interieur] climbed down from the driver's cabin, machinegun in hand. He opened the rear hatch, climbed into the truck, and mowed down the Indians. It all only lasted a few seconds. The Indians fell on their faces. The truck was riddled with bullet holes, and blood flowed in rivulets. Reactions were quite varied. There were screams and exclamations, but there was also applause, and then everything was over. The truck then drove in the direction of the prefecture, and disappeared. (Breustedt 1991)

This report corrects and clarifies the information that was recorded after the war by the French upon request by the India Office and the Foreign Office. According to this information, it was the same 29 Indians who had been captured near Bourg-L'Archambault. They had been part of German units that had terrorised the civilian population in that region and even killed members of the Resistance. A concrete description of the circumstances that led to the death of the Indians left many questions, but the British were in no doubt "that the behaviour of the French was a reaction to the attitude of the Indian Legion during retreat, given that in the beginning the captured Indians had been treated well by them" (Voigt 1978: 295).

Members of the Legion were informed about the process of desertion that SS units in pursuit had "caught the whole lot of deserters and without much ado hanged them from trees, where they were found by Indian dispatch riders" (Rose 1989: 146). This version is/was difficult



to sustain, because, in Ruffec, Indian legionaries were addressed in the familiar voice of a deserter sergeant in Hindustani:

Wake up, Indians! The Germans are bound to lose the war their days are numbered. The Germans wanted to dominate the whole world, but now quite a different fate is awaiting them [...] Do not for a moment believe that they can ever be victorious. [...] And bear in mind that had they won they would never have given you a Free India.... If you ever want to see India free, join the Free French. Only a Free France could guarantee the freedom of India. (Mangat 1986: 180)

During the Legion's stopover at Chateauroux, the lie about the stay of legionaries who had deserted was exposed. Written by Bannerth, the interpreter for the Legion, pamphlets with the following text in Hindustani were dropped in various locations:

Go over to the French, just as we have done. Nothing has happened to us. Nothing will happen to you either, if you show this note at the French post. Bring your weapons along. Render the Germans harmless. Shoot them down, if they resist. Jai Azad Hind! (Rose 1989: 159)

Unaffected by this, the official version from the Indian point of view was, that the deserters were

particularly Grafts and Barons [...] and they managed to take some opportunist Indians also with them. Such Indians had reportedly joined the Maquis and pursued the Legion for quite some distance... Having exploited their collaborators, the French killed many of them [...]. (Mangat 1986: 179)

After the events at Ruffec and Poitiers, only a few instances of desertion are mentioned in the sources, although "in the autumn of 1944, enemy propaganda was quite active" (BA/MA 1984: II/75).<sup>22</sup> The tragic outcome of the desertion by those Indians who were shot by members of the Resistance may have strongly influenced the decision of other legionaries fearful of a similar fate, and who may have wished to reverse their decision of joining the Legion on account of the situation swiftly turning unfavourable for their Allies. One of the most important causes to look for in this case would be that there were no further desertions of a significant magnitude, and the "Indians incomprehensibly remained true to the Legion" (Rose 1989: 160). From the point of view of the Indians there were no further desertions because "the eyes of our men were not on what was happening before them



but were directed towards their great but distant objective, the Freedom of India" (Ganpuley 1959: 163).

Reaction to the desertion by German legionaries from the ranks of officers can be reconstructed on the basis of a few retrospective reports. The departure of Heinrich von Trott two days before the execution of his brother on 24 August 1944 was met with "complete understanding" among a few officers (Hartog 1991: 140). The activities of his brother Adam von Trott zu Solz in the special unit of the Foreign Office had resulted in a more or less direct contact with the Indian Legion. It was on account of his efforts that his brother Heinrich was transferred to the Legion from the eastern front (Kuhlmann 2000: 339). Other reactions expressed doubt:

We did understand them [Heinrich von Trott, Bannerth and Koch-Grünberg] especially the first two very well, Trott on account of just the arrest on family liability, and yet were very concerned. Can one as a sensible person change loyalties in such a situation? Did not all the Germans in the Legion share a common destiny along with the Indians we were entrusted with? (Franzen 1981: 104)

But there was also outright condemnation, tied to a feeling of uncertainty:

Our indignation knew no bounds, as we saw this as an irresponsible prank against German-Indian comradeship and a terrible endangerment of the entire Legion. There was no way in which to anticipate how our Indians would react to such bad news, whether they would rise in mutiny, whether they would defect, whether they would kill us Germans in order to endear themselves to the Allies? (Rose 1989: 146)

Koch-Grünberg, the senior Legion doctor, in retrospect was aware of the consequences of his defection to the Resistance, in so far as

one would then have to reckon with immediate consequences; that one would have to be decisive. One would have to be determined enough, given the circumstances, to see one's own comrades as bitter enemies [...] One would have to draw a line under the past, which, as I know from my own experience, is after all very, very difficult. It was far easier to stay on. That is what most Germans did. (Breustedt 1991)



## Summary

The few questions posed here on the deployment of the Indian Legion in France have clearly shown that this is a multi-layered phenomenon upon which no conclusive inferences can be drawn on account of the gaps in the available source-material, and varying, on occasion even contradictory, statements and descriptions from Indian, German, and French contemporaries. The choice of the Atlantic coast as a deployment location was a futile attempt in keeping the Legion out of the commotion of war as initially intended. Militarily the Indian Legion was condemned to meaninglessness. Even its propaganda function and its utility as an instrument of mobilisation vis-a-vis the independence movement in India, as against the radio programmes of the Free India Centre, remained ineffective.

Given the sympathy of the Indian public for the decision of some of their countrymen to fight on the side of the Axis powers for the freedom of India, Britain thought it advisable after the war to waive their prosecution. After the defeat of Hitler's Germany in 1945 and British India's independence in 1947 one can only surmise that erstwhile Indian members of the Legion may have questioned the sense behind and the meaningfulness of their decision taking into consideration character, behaviour and the genuine war aims of their ally.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Revised and updated version of the original paper (Oesterheld 2000). Translation by Parnal Chirmuley.

<sup>2</sup> In the year 1984, 48 texts in the form of documents and reports in three files, earlier held and compiled by former German legionaries, were handed over to the Federal and Military Archives in Freiburg:

Indian Legion. File I: Documents, reports, and records from the war years

Indian Legion. File II: Records from the 1950s

Indian Legion. File III: Records dated 1983 (and 1981)

Information from these Legion files is cited under BA/MA 1984 with accompanying numbering between I and III for respective files and corresponding page numbers.

<sup>3</sup> "The use of the Indian Battalion stands and falls with the few German officers, on whom it depends. The conduct of the Indians is not to be foreseen, should these officers become incapacitated in combat, either by death or injury. They may, given such circumstances, even fight against us [...] the induction of even stronger foreign formations in the army corps is alarming, if not entirely dangerous. Even the third Indian battalion signifies more a disadvantage than an advantage" (as quoted in Kuhlmann: 2003, 329).

<sup>4</sup> Sergeant Robert Frese of the twelfth company, who was directly involved, later recalled that "Building machine gun nests and foxholes or small wooden bunkers, which had to be built in the drifting sand below the crest of dunes, was work cut out for Sisyphus. Unlike in other areas, it was impossible to dig there because the sand would repeatedly trickle back" (Hartog 1991: 107).



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<sup>5</sup> Handwritten in Urdu and Devanagari script, along with illustrations, *Bhaiband* saw nearly 200 issues with some interruptions before it published its last issue in the little town of Volkertshausen near the Swiss border, after it had been described by one of its publishers as the 'rag of the century' (Hartog 1991: 133; Rose, n. d.: 79-88 and 201).

<sup>6</sup> 25 June 1944 (Rose, n.d.: 70) is cited along with 23 May 1944 (Hartog 1991: 133) as the exact time of the first broadcast.

<sup>7</sup> „[...] some 500 Indian P.O.Ws, were brought to Lacanau from an Indian P.O.W. Camp to be put in the neighbour-hood of the Legion troops for 'conversion'. They were placed in charge of an Indian officer[...] When he realised that he would not be able to win over a majority from these P.O.W.'s he devised most atrocious methods, in which he out-heroded Herod, in order to break their spirit of resistance and their morale" (Fisher 2015: 187).

<sup>8</sup> For further details and impressions of these camps, see BA/MA 1984: III/45-48, Mangat 1986: 146-7; and Fisher 2015: 419.

<sup>9</sup> "[...] it is quite certain, that the majority of the volunteers [...] did not volunteer exclusively for patriotic reasons. Life in the Nazi prisoner-of-war camps was hard and the food poor; and in order to encourage Bose's recruitment drive, Indian prisoners of war were now deprived of almost all the rights guaranteed to them by the Geneva Convention, including the right to receive food parcels from home. On the other hand, if an Indian prisoner of war volunteered for Bose's army he was immediately vastly better off" (Bharati 1961:50). Vis a vis the Red Cross it was maintained, "that the parcels were meant for prisoners who could not be contacted owing to an outbreak of an epidemic" (Bannerth 1996: 386).

<sup>10</sup> "Early in 1944 discipline amongst the legionaries manning the Western Wall once more deteriorated [...] In the course of this retreat morale in the 950th Regiment broke down completely, the legionaries being little more than a rabble, indulging in looting, arson and rape to an extent which obliged even the Germans to take action to mollify the local inhabitants" (Report 1944: 395).

<sup>11</sup> There are varying descriptions and assessments of these methods among German and Indian legionaries (Rose n.d.: 41; Mangat 1986: 196-9) and in the Legion files (BA/MA 1984: I/136-7).

<sup>12</sup> A connection the present author suspected between the Legion and espionage involving an Indian woman in France does not stand corroborated (see Fuller 1988).

<sup>13</sup> It is difficult to verify this statement, according to which, unlike the campaign at Mont de Marsan, "elsewhere, however the Maquis suffered heavy casualties" (Mangat 1986: 176), refers to the campaign in the forest of Hourtin or to other skirmishes between the two sides elsewhere. On the other hand, the statement referring to an Indian legionary who wanted to help a soldier of the US Army descending on a parachute and shot in the process, can be said with some certainty to refer to the Hourtin region (Bannerth 1996: 387).

<sup>14</sup> "The Maquis fight for the liberation of France from the Germans and the Indians fight for the liberation from the British. It is a matter of sheer coincidence that your enemy happens to be our friend and our enemy happens to be your ally" (Mangat 1986: 177).

<sup>15</sup> "In Poitiers I had precisely the kind of a doomsday feeling, that I threw away everything possible and impossible [...]" (Hartog 1991: 142). "I can no longer bear this constant fear of those approaching. I will either shoot myself through the head, or go over to the Maquis" (Rose, n. d.: 147). "That Germany had lost the war became clear to the people only at the latest during the retreat from France, and there may have been those who guessed this even a little earlier ... I do, however, remember that there would be one or another Indian who would carefully ask about the possibility of staying back in Germany" (BA/MA 1984: III/86).

<sup>16</sup> "To my knowledge there were five cases of rape during the retreat [...]" (Bharati 1961: 62).



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<sup>17</sup> Rose gives a detailed account of the proceedings in Luzy and near Champlitte (Hartog names Frettes, and Rose, on the other hand, names Jussey), in which he participated as interpreter (Rose:168-71 and 177-9).

<sup>18</sup> "As a token of appreciation of the Indians act of valour, Reichsfuehrer Heinrich Himmler suggested that the Legion be affiliated with the crack German troops, the Waffen-SS" (Mangat 1991:199).

<sup>19</sup> 320 legionaries lost their lives to American air raids on 21 June 1944 (Fisher 2015: 188).

<sup>20</sup> See the television programme by Arndt Breustedt containing interviews with Dr. Ernst Koch-Grünberg and former legionaries Hans Kutscher, Benno Erhard, and Hans Franzen, with former members of the Resistance and eyewitnesses of the shooting of Indian legionaries in Poitiers (Breustedt, 1991).

<sup>21</sup> This version is found in a verbatim account in Ganpuley 1959: 162. A differing account states: "At the square in Poitiers, a captured 'Hindu' attempted to stab a French officer after he alighted from the truck. It is said that the officer shot him, upon which some confusion ensued, and as a consequence, all 'Hindus' were shot by intervening guards and other Resistance fighters. None of these 'Hindus' who were shot bore any identifications papers. Only a butcher's knife was found with one of those shot. They were all buried at the 'Fond de Misere' between Clan and Grandpoint" (Voigt 1978: 295).

<sup>22</sup> "One morning, in the French partisan stronghold – the Indians were nervous – my attendant went missing along with his bicycle. I suspected desertion, and on top in my luggage arranged by him – quite charmingly wrapped – I found a few small gifts (English cigarettes from the ominous packages that they still embarrassingly received from the Red Cross, among other things). It occurred to me, that he had gallantly invited me to a goose dinner, which was quite unusual" ("Its all been paid for, Lieutenant"). He had said goodbye to me (Franzen 1981: 103).

"The battalion commander, Dr. Kutscher had entrusted a sergeant who had a fair understanding for horses with a magnificent black horse and strict orders to under no circumstances hand over the horse to anyone else. But he did that, gave it to an Indian [...] and he rode the valuable horse to the French. The loss of this horse hurt the IL [Indian Legion] more than that of the deserter and the disobedience of the sergeant, who was then punished" (Rose n.d.: 191).

"[...] in the confusion during the departure and the march from the camp on the Rhine, seven volunteers disappeared and no one ever heard from them again" (BA/MA1984: II/75).

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