

RESEARCH ARTICLE

How a Nazi occupied India's first chair in International Relations

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Abstract

This article contributes to disciplinary histories of International Relations (IR) by revealing a little-known history: how a Nazi diplomat, Curt Max Prüfer, occupied the first chair in IR in India. While the paper documents how Prüfer, a discredited diplomat, landed in Delhi through his connections with peripatetic Indian anti-colonial networks and spent slightly over two years as the first IR chair at Delhi University, it also makes broader claims about how we narrate disciplinary histories. Intellectual genealogies, the predominant way in which disciplinary histories are written, often miss the contingent factors that play a considerable role in the fashioning of the discipline. Contingency-filled narratives also point towards the fact that International Relations/Affairs, at least in its early period of formation, operated as a term of mythical heft – a placeholder to fit anyone with academic or practical expertise in varied fields such as international law, colonial administration, anthropology, diplomacy, history, political economy, and military strategy.

Keywords: Curt Max Prüfer; disciplinary history; India; Nazism; Subhash Chandra Bose

Introduction

‘Everything is either a conspiracy or a cock-up.’ (Frederik van Zyl Slabbert)¹

Disciplinary history is now a burgeoning sub-field in International Relations (IR). A spate of works in the last three decades have excavated the biographies of the discipline.² In particular,

¹South African academic turned politician Frederik van Zyl Slabbert would often say this. For more on Slabbert, see Albert Grundlingh, *Slabbert: Man on a Mission* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2021). Many thanks to Peter Vale for directing us to Slabbert's aphorism.

²For a representative sample, see Brian C. Schmidt, *The Political Discourse of Anarchy: A Disciplinary History of International Relations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998); Nicolas Guilhot, *After the Enlightenment: Political Realism and International Relations in the Mid-Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Nicolas Guilhot, *The Invention of International Relations Theory: Realism, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the 1954 Conference on Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Robert Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015); David Long and Brian C. Schmidt (eds), *Imperialism and Internationalism in the Discipline of International Relations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005); Patricia Owens and Katharina Rietzler (eds), *Women's International Thought: A New History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Lucian Ashworth, *A History of International Thought: From the Origins of the Modern State to Academic International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2014); Siba Grovogui, *Beyond Eurocentrism and Anarchy: Memories and International Order and Institutions* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Felix Rösch (ed.), *Émigré Scholars and the Genesis of International Relations: A European Discipline in America?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Vineet Thakur and Peter Vale, *South*

inspired by Robert Vitalis's pathbreaking work, an emphasis on the origins and subsequent developments of the discipline has revealed the coloniality of IR's disciplinary biography.³ Given that most of these histories focused on Western contexts, more recent efforts have explored the origins and operations of the discipline in non-Western spaces.⁴ In making the case for 'multiple births' of IR, Vineet Thakur and Karen Smith contend that there is no singular universal IR story. Indeed, the discipline is not always a reproduction of Western modes of intra-disciplinary thinking. Instead, contextual logics and politics are often imbricated in the seemingly coherent production of what we call IR. Making a case for attentiveness to *roots* as well as *routes*, they invited scholars to excavate 'the multitude of disciplinary histories that remain to be told'.⁵

Plainly, our effort here is a response to that call, as we add another story to the multiple births. The crux of our story is better staged as a question.

Question: Who was the first chair of International Relations in India?

Answer: Curt Prüfer.

Question: Who was Curt Prüfer?

Answer: A Nazi.

Factlets such as the above have a specific way of embedding themselves in disciplinary narratives. They are crucial to framing and farming our disciplinary consciousness. Indeed, much like any other form of narrative, disciplinary history narratives consciously accumulate a self-identity through carefully curated gathering and presentation of facts. Questions such as 'who, what, and where' scaffold our imagination of the discipline. At the same time, as recent works have shown, nothing ruptures this sense of self than a powerful (counter-)factlet. Think of how the claim that *Foreign Affairs* was originally titled *Journal of Race Development* has become representative of a broader shift in the arc of how IR's disciplinary narratives are now told.⁶ Or the fact that the first chair of IR in Aberystwyth, often credited solely to David Davies's generosity and spirit, was co-funded by Gwendoline Davies and Margaret Davies, both his sisters.⁷ Or that the term 'International Thought' itself comes from a book from F. Melian Stawell, whose work was purloined by Gilbert Murray.⁸ Each of these facts, embedded in the natal moments, direct us towards alternative narratives, staggered silences, and wilful erasures that constitute the academic discipline we call IR.

Hence, a Nazi landing up in Nehru's India is a strange and startling piece of trivia for the historically minded, but two broad considerations have prompted us to chase this factlet.⁹ First,

Africa, Race and the Making of International Relations (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020); Alexander Davis, Vineet Thakur, and Peter Vale, *The Imperial Discipline: Race and Founding of International Relations* (London: Pluto Press, 2020); Jan Stöckmann, 'Studying the international, serving the nation: The origins of International Relations (IR) scholarship in Germany, 1912–33', *The International History Review*, 38:5 (2016), pp. 1055–80.

³Vitalis, *White World Order*.

⁴Thakur and Vale, *South Africa*. For more specific national IR origin histories of International Studies, see the *Review of International Studies* special issue 47:5 (2021), pp. 571–671. It has articles on China (Yih-Jye Hwang), Brazil (Carlos Milani), South Korea (Jungmin Seo and Young Chul Cho), Australia (Alexander Davis), and Ghana (Thomas Kwasi Tieku).

⁵Vineet Thakur and Karen Smith, 'Introduction to the special issue: The multiple births of International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 47:5 (2021), pp. 571–9.

⁶Robert Vitalis, 'Birth of a discipline', in David Long and Brain C. Schmidt (eds), *Imperialism and Internationalism in the Discipline of International Relations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), pp. 159–82.

⁷Vineet Thakur and Peter Vale, 'The empty neighbourhood: Race and disciplinary silence', in Jenny Edkins (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Critical International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 34–48.

⁸Glenda Sluga, 'From F. Melian Stawell to E. Greene Balch: International and internationalist thinking at the gender margins, 1919–1947', in Patricia Owens and Katharina Rietzler (eds), *Women's International Thought: A New History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 223–43.

⁹On factoids and factlets, see Alexis Madrigal, 'Down with factoid! Up with factlet!', *The Atlantic* (29 March 2012), available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/03/down-with-factoid-up-with-factlet/255235/>.

we are keen on excavating the condition of possibility itself. That a Nazi could be employed to inaugurate an IR chair in India is a puzzling fact in need of an explanation. As we will show, this seemingly extraordinary factlet is not exactly so, once we dig deeper into the complicated histories of decolonisation. The essay will show that the extraordinariness of this factlet is rooted in the very ordinariness of the constellation of factors that made it happen. It is a rather banal assemblage of anti-colonial networks, bureaucratic politics, and fetishisation of expertise in post-colonial nations that brings Prüfer to India.

Second, this 'birth' story points to another dimension of disciplinary histories. The South African academic-turned-politician Frederik van Zyl Slabbert used to say: 'Everything is either a conspiracy or a cock-up.' Disciplinary histories *discipline*. They bring together persons, ideas, and institutions and fit them within a specific grand narrative. They project narrative coherence, often contrived and telescoped from the requirements of the present, and thus, in Slabbert's phraseology, they are conspiracies. But what if at least some of the 'birth' stories are cock-ups? In other words, what if there was no conceived (pre- or post-) logic, or intellectual motivation, in fashioning the discipline and assembling its architecture?

Instead, what if the 'birth' was purely a contingent matter? Still further, what if the birth was a stillbirth? How do we narrate and where in the disciplinary biography do we fit in the misfits, miscarriages, and stillbirths?¹⁰ Going further, what do cock-ups tell us about the discipline and its self-narratives?

We discuss below the micro-history of the first IR chair in India. The focus here is on contingent rather than intellectual factors that contributed to the establishment of this chair. Here, instead of taking a consequentialist view of historical narration – writing to demonstrate how an event is important to the subsequent development of the discipline – our approach is genealogical – we investigate the conditions of possibility for how an event came together. Such an approach to disciplinary history allows us to reconsider our vantage points in disciplinary narrative. By thinking of 'natal moments' as a constellation or an *assemblage*, we strip them of the presentist certainties that they tend to accumulate in our disciplinary narratives. Furthermore, this approach also helps us open the meanings of 'International Relations/Affairs' as an anchoring term for the discipline to interpretation.

With that in mind, we explore first what conditions made it possible for Prüfer, a Nazi official, to be employed in India in late 1948. Here, we show how pro-Nazi Indian anti-colonial networks facilitated his arrival in India. Thereafter, we detail how Prüfer's hiring was facilitated by the convergence of the needs of a newly developing Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), which placed high premium on 'expertise', and a conveniently framed lie that Prüfer was anti-Nazi. The final section of the essay discusses Prüfer's time in India and his many struggles, including formalising a vision for 'International Affairs', before he returned to Germany in early 1951. In the conclusion, we (re)turn to the question of narrating cock-ups.

Disciplinary histories and modes of narration

Nearly three decades ago, Brian Schmidt identified two main modes of narration of disciplinary history in IR: tradition-based and context-based.¹¹ The former are attempts at narrating the progress of the discipline through an internal dialectic of competing ideas or paradigms and accordingly serve to 'support or undermine a particular rendition of the current or desired state of the discipline'.¹² In contrast, contextualised accounts in IR summon external events to explain the development of the discipline.¹³ Schmidt warns disciplinary historians against two vices that

¹⁰Many thanks to Maxine David for asking this very question in a workshop a few years ago.

¹¹Brian C. Schmidt, 'The historiography of academic International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 20:4 (1994), pp. 349–61.

¹²Schmidt, 'Historiography', p. 351. See also Schmidt, *Political Discourse of Anarchy*.

¹³One classic such account is Stanley Hoffman, 'An American social science: International Relations', *Daedalus*, 106:3 (1977), pp. 41–60.

pervade both these modes: presentism and a sometimes rather too expansive understanding of 'International Relations'. He argues that the appropriate context for investigating the discipline's history is its academic setting and not the world at large. Accordingly, Schmidt asks disciplinary historians to write 'a history that traces the actual lineage of scholars who self-consciously and institutionally understood themselves as participating in the academic discourse of international relations'.¹⁴

A key question here however is what constitutes an 'academic' setting of any discipline? According to Immanuel Wallerstein, academic disciplines are defined not only through specific fields of enquiry, i.e. a set of core questions and themes, but also through their epistemological cultures. Disciplines facilitate participation in certain styles of scholarship by prioritising distinct ways of understanding, accumulating, and disseminating knowledge over others. Equally importantly however, academic disciplines are created and sustained through institutional mechanisms, such as the setting up of specific university departments, degree programmes, and professional associations, which categorise knowledge through disciplinary journals, book series, and other forms of institutionalised academic outputs.¹⁵

Schmidt's counsel is to focus on academic settings, such as university departments or think-tanks, to narrate genealogical trajectories of the discipline. However, he takes a somewhat 'academic' view of these departments/think-tanks by asking us to focus on academic discourses emerging out of these institutional sites. This raises questions on researching IR's disciplinary histories, in particular, although not exclusively, for Global South scholarship. Considering the general lack of universities – not to mention university departments (and think-tanks) – until the post-colonial era, disciplinary histories that focus on the academic production from institutional sites, and not on wider traditions of thinking, by definition, erase any imaginative claims to history-making within the discipline from the Global South. Indeed, Global South disciplinary histories are reduced to cataloguing forms of institutional and academic mimicry of Global North institutions.

Furthermore, institutions do not consistently prioritise academic logics over institutional compulsions/idiosyncrasies. For instance, whether an IR programme is placed within Political Science, or History, or International Law, whether it is an autonomous programme, or whether it is even called IR (or Global Studies, International and Area Studies, Global Governance, etc.) is often shaped by motives, traditions, and constraints of bureaucratic decision-making rather than purely intellectual self-definitions. Indeed, considerations such as bureaucratic procedures, contingency demands, inter-/intra-departmental/institutional rivalries and negotiations, benchmarking practices related to 'impact' and placement with the science/social science/humanities continuum, funding cycles,¹⁶ and not to forget personal ambitions (or lack thereof) are formative to the developments of any discipline, its path dependencies, and ruptures.¹⁷ Such considerations have immense influence on both the trajectory of intellectual debates as well as the shaping of disciplinary histories. For IR, what is at stake here is not merely the institutional architecture that the discipline builds, but also the very meaning of what 'International Relations' is.

To illustrate this, let us ask a general question: why were some of the first chairs of International Relations established around the globe? Unquestionably, the setting up of IR chairs in many Western countries was tied to their role in shaping the world. For instance, International Studies/Area Studies departments after the Second World War gathered and produced knowledge in certain ways to codify an American understanding of the world. But in several other parts of the world, 'International Affairs/Relations/Studies' was merely a placeholder; a term of mysterious

¹⁴Schmidt, 'Historiography', p. 359.

¹⁵Immanuel Wallerstein, 'Anthropology, sociology, and other dubious disciplines', *Current Anthropology*, 44:4 (2003), pp. 453–60.

¹⁶Indeed, International Relations as a discipline in India continues to be shaped primarily by bureaucratic rather than intellectual motivations. Recently, funding for several Area Studies departments has been stopped by the University Grants Commission.

¹⁷For instance, on how strong institutional and individual motivations have shaped IR in Brazil, see Carlos Milani, 'The foundation and development of International Relations in Brazil', *Review of International Studies*, 47:5 (2021), pp. 601–17.

heft which juxtaposed three sets of inherently contradictory concerns: ‘scientifically’ studying relations among sovereign and colonised states, advocating for national interest, and achieving world peace.¹⁸ The range for who could be classified as an ‘International Affairs’ expert was wide. It could mean those with academic or practical expertise in varied fields such as international law, colonial administration, anthropology, diplomacy, history, political economy, and military strategy. This was still a discipline without a coherent language or conceptual scheme – the theoretical core was yet to be identified and hence the requirements for a fit were minimal.¹⁹

Consequently, a global survey of disciplinary histories would reveal an adhocism which is perhaps not as evident in the current renderings of largely West-focused disciplinary histories.²⁰ The story we tell below points us towards the adhocism and the cock-up-ish nature of disciplinary foundations. No grand design or recurring patterns, but a contingency binds the story as we investigate the multi-institutional politics at play in scheming for chairs of IR.

With these concerns, our approach to disciplinary history in this essay is genealogical. This means that our enquiry into disciplinary history is not motivated by how a particular event (a Nazi occupying the first chair of IR) has shaped the subsequent development of academic IR in India, but rather that we seek to investigate the condition of possibility of this event, which may otherwise appear counter-intuitive. In other words, what is it that made it possible in the first place that a Nazi could occupy the first IR chair in post-colonial India? We show that this specific assembling of a Nazi, an IR chair, and post-colonial India requires suturing a constellation of bureaucracies, networks, and ideologies. It allows bringing together the seemingly differential but intimately interconnected histories of peripatetic anti-colonial networks, the developmentalist needs of ‘scientific’ expertise for a newly independent country, the formative logics of an embryonic foreign service which sees little difference between international affairs and foreign policy, and the politics of turf wars between a university and foreign office.

And placed at the centre of this narrative is a former Nazi official, now impoverished and keen on erasing his own questionable past. Taken on its own, the factlet, a Nazi occupying an IR chair, is seemingly an extraordinary one. But by focusing on its production, the micro-processing of this fact, we elaborate on the seemingly mundane interconnections that made it possible.

Indian anti-colonial imaginaries and Nazism

In the period between 1909 and 1939, as Carolien Stolte has argued,²¹ Indian anti-colonial nationalists were spread across the globe from Japan to America, and from Scandinavia to South Africa, encompassing the full range of the ideological spectrum. Several new and old works have explored the stunning expanse of transnational anti-colonial solidarities in the first half of the 20th century involving a plethora of individuals and organisations – a worldwide web of anti-colonialism, as Stolte calls it – that fashioned alternative globalities.²² The broad rubric of anti-colonialism contained a range of anarchists, nationalists, and cosmopolitans in its fold, who all conceived of different paths to ending colonialism. Anti-colonialism was neither an ideological fixity nor a singular way of thinking and imagining politics. Indeed, many anti-colonial visions contained

¹⁸For these contradictions, see Angadipuram Appadorai, ‘University teaching in International Relations in India’, *India Quarterly*, 10:1 (1954), pp. 52–71.

¹⁹Guilhot, *The Invention of International Relations Theory*.

²⁰See the RIS special issue, ‘Multiple births’, 47:5 (2021). Here, we do not suggest that West-focused histories can only be intellectual, while non-West focused histories allow for more contingency, but that the current state of disciplinary history tends to project West-focused disciplinary histories as overtly intellectual.

²¹Carolien Stolte, ‘South Asia and South Asians in the worldwide web of anti-colonial solidarity’, in Harald Fischer-Tiné and Maria Framke (eds), *Routledge Handbook of the History of Colonialism in South Asia* (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 463–73 (p. 463).

²²Tim Harper, *Underground Asia: Global Revolutionaries and the Assault on Empire* (London: Penguin, 2020); Moon Ho-Jung, *Menace to Empire: Anticolonial Solidarities and the Transpacific Origins of the US Security State* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022); Ole Birk Laursen, *Metropolitan Anticolonialism: The Indian Revolutionary Movement in Europe, 1905–1918* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, forthcoming).

kernels of colonial thought within, which manifested in their post-colonial polities. Martin Bayly elaborates on the 'mixed registers' of these imaginings in Indian internationalism – these could be simultaneously imperial and anti-colonial, racist and anti-racist, and hierarchical and egalitarian.²³

The very context of the emergence of Indian nationalism is, one could argue, a pernicious form of anti-Muslim, right-wing, and casteist politics.²⁴ Early youth radical organisations (such as the Anushilan Samiti in Bengal) emerged in the context of sharpening religious polarisation in the country, helped no doubt by the divisive politics of the colonial regime. It is no coincidence that the radical triumvirate Lal-Bal-Pal were also anti-Muslim and advocated a reform-oriented but essentially upper-caste-reinforcing politics.²⁵

Another less studied aspect of Indian anti-colonial thought is its flirtations with fascism. Although Subhash Chandra Bose's alliance with Axis powers is well known, it is often read in the spirit of bold pragmatism.²⁶ Bose was an Indian nationalist first and did not mind allying with Nazis when needed. He remained, the biographer of Alex von Trott suggests, 'too ignorant of world outside India to understand what Nazism was.'²⁷ However, this is a misplaced reading. Indeed, quite on the contrary, rather than any lack of understanding, Bose's Faustian pact was steeped in an admiration of a global authoritarian vision.²⁸

Bose admired the Japanese for their conquests and recommended that Britain's African colonies should be given over to Germany after the former's defeat.²⁹ He was certainly not shy of protesting against Nazis, but only when it came to their racial policies against Indians.³⁰ He had a personal experience of racism when a child called him the N-word on the streets of Munich.³¹ In a pamphlet written after this visit to Germany in 1933–4, he complained against race propaganda, but only so far as it concerned Indians. Bose appealed for the exclusion of only Indians from the Nuremberg Laws that the German Ministry of Justice was then considering bringing in against Jews and non-whites.³² He protested an article on racial science in the official Nazi newspaper, *Völkischer Beobachter*, for describing Indians as 'bastards'. If at all, he added, Indians were better at racial science than Nazis themselves. He wrote: 'In spite of all the tall talk of racial purity in Germany, the fact remains that if there is any country in the world where a systematic attempt has been made to preserve purity of blood not only within the race but also within caste, that is India.'³³

²³ Martin Bayley, 'Global intellectual history in International Relations: Hierarchy, empire, and the case of late colonial Indian international thought', *Review of International Studies*, 49:3 (2023), pp. 428–47.

²⁴ Parimala V. Rao, *Foundation of Tilak's Nationalism, Discrimination, Education and Hindutva* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010); Perry Anderson, *The Indian Ideology* (New Delhi: Verso, 2013).

²⁵ Lala Lajpat Rai, Balgangadhar Tilak, and Bipin Chandra Pal, known as Lal-Bal-Pal, are seen as the first generation of radical anti-colonial leaders in India. See P. D. Saggi, *Life and Work of Lal, Bal and Pal: A Nation's Homage* (New Delhi: Overseas Publishing House, 1962); William Gould, *Hindu Nationalism and the Language of Politics in Late Colonial India* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India 1885–1947* (New Delhi: Pearson, 2014).

²⁶ An anti-colonial leader, who became an opponent of Gandhi from late 1930s, Subhas Chandra Bose turned to first Germany and later Japan to create an Indian National Army (INA) to fight against the British.

²⁷ Christopher Sykes, *Troubled Loyalty: A Biography of Adam von Trott zu Solz* (London: Collins, 1968), p. 350.

²⁸ For Bose's views on national and international politics, see Sisir K. Bose and Sugata Bose, *The Essential Writings of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2022).

²⁹ Sykes, *Troubled Loyalty*, p. 350.

³⁰ Bose questioned Hitler on his derogatory comments about Indians in *Mein Kampf*, who said that he would rather cooperate with Britain than Indians since it was 'a question of establishing a Nordic-Germanic America, over the world'. Hitler quoted in Milan Hauner, *Hitler: A Chronology of His Life and Time* (London: Macmillan, 1983), p. 25. He had expressed similar thoughts in his autobiography. Alfred Rosenberg, the NSDAP foreign affairs chief, held contemptuous view of Indians and believed in the continuation of British rule in India.

³¹ This is reminiscent of a similar encounter that Frantz Fanon was later to write about in *Black Skins, White Masks*. See, Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), pp. 113–14.

³² S. C. Bose, 'Germany and India', 5 April 1934, in RZ 207/77,417, 'Politische Beziehungen Indiens zu Deutschland', Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts, Berlin.

³³ For a history of ideological connections between antisemitism, racism, and casteism in German and Indian thought, see Bose to Prüfer, 7 May 1935, RZ 207/77,417, 'Politische Beziehungen Indiens zu Deutschland'.

Bose's proud reminder of caste as the original form of scientific racism harnessed the strong intellectual collaboration between German and Indian thinkers on casteism, antisemitism, and racism under the rubric of Aryanism.³⁴ Furthermore, later, not once did Bose say a word of sympathy for those who died in concentration camps.³⁵

However, Bose was far more sympathetic to and influenced by Mussolini's fascism than Hitler's Nazism, as his close associate A. C. N. Nambiar – who will appear below – noted.³⁶ Bose's doctrine of *samyavada* was a 'mechanistic' synthesis of communist and fascist ideologies geared to India's requirements and advocated for an authoritarian system, for a strong centre and a national language.³⁷ Bose's India Legion, which fought on the side of Germany, was one of the most despised units by the French because of their extreme brutality.³⁸

While the anti-British character of the fascist regimes is one explanation for the fascination of Indian leaders with Italy and in some measure Germany, pragmatism was not the only reason. Both countries were idolised for their cultural, political, and scientific 'regeneration' through the agency of the state. The unitary state, or state-nation – the state forming one nation – was worth emulating for the regeneration of India (an *Aryavarta*, or Greater India). The fascist origins of some of India's right-wing parties and political groups are well known,³⁹ but several Indian anti-colonial nationalists endorsed the imperialist character of this state. Taraknath Das,⁴⁰ for instance, endorsed Italian colonisation of Abyssinia as an ideal precedent for India's policy towards East Africa.⁴¹ Das had also collaborated with Karl Haushofer, the soldier-turned-geopolitical-thinker who coined the term *Lebensraum*,⁴² to open the India Institute as part of the Deutsche Akademie. Haushofer, staunchly anti-Britain, had seen hopes in the domestic discontent against the British empire in India for the disintegration of the Anglo-Saxon power, paving the way for a Eurasian bloc – consisting of Russia, Japan, and a Germany-centred Europe.⁴³

A key function of the India Institute in the 1930s was to defend the Nazi regime against efforts to portray the German state as racist towards Indians. Another friend of Haushofer, Benoy Kumar

³⁴See Dorothy M. Figueira, *Aryans, Jews, Brahmins: Theorizing Authority through Myths of Identity* (Albany: State University of New York, 2002); Romila Thapar, 'The theory of Aryan race and India: History and politics', *Social Scientist*, 24:1/3 (1996), pp. 3–29; Joan Leopold, 'The Aryan theory of race', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review*, 7:2 (1970), pp. 271–97; Ida R. Birkvad, 'The ambivalence of Aryanism: A genealogical reading of India–Europe connection', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 49:1 (2020), pp. 58–79.

³⁵Romain Hayes, *Subhas Chandra Bose in Nazi Germany: Politics, Intelligence and Propaganda 1941–1943* (n.p.: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 252. Hayes argues that Bose himself may have written an antisemitic article in a paper owned by Goebbels. See Hayes, *Subhash Chandra Bose*, p. 253.

³⁶A. C. N. Nambiar, Oral History Transcript, pp. 9 and 88, National Memorial and Museum Library, New Delhi (henceforth NMML); also see Milan Hauner, *India in Axis Strategy: Germany, Japan, and Indian Nationalists in the Second World War* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981), p. 58.

³⁷Hauner, *India in Axis Strategy*, p. 60; Sugata Bose, *His Majesty's Opponent: Subhas Chandra Bose and India's Struggle against Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); Rajat Roy, 'Nehru said there's no middle road between fascism and communism. Bose thought otherwise', *The Print* (31 January 2022), available at: <https://theprint.in/opinion/nehru-said-theres-no-middle-road-between-fascism-and-communism-bose-thought-otherwise/816879/>.

³⁸Hayes, *Subhas Chandra Bose in Nazi Germany*, p. 245.

³⁹The Hindu Mahasabha had one of the strongest pro-German stances, based on a false interpretation of the Aryan cult. See Hauner, *India in Axis Strategy*, p. 66; Baijayanti Roy, 'Hakenkreuz, swastika and crescent: The religious factor in Nazi cultural politics regarding India', in Isabella Schwaderer and Gerdien Jonker (eds), *Religious Entanglements between Germans and Indians, 1800–1945* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), pp. 253–82; Dharendra K. Jha, 'Guruji's lie', *The Caravan* (31 July 2021), available at <https://caravanmagazine.in/history/rss-golwalkar-links-nazism>.

⁴⁰Taraknath Das was an Indian revolutionary and played key role as a linchpin of a global network of anti-colonial activists and activities.

⁴¹Maria Framke, 'Shopping ideologies for independent India? Taraknath Das's engagement with Italian fascism and German national socialism', *Itinerario*, 40:1 (2016), pp. 5–81 (p. 70).

⁴²Haushofer was also Rudolf Hess's teacher; he visited Hitler and Hess in prison during the summer and fall of 1924 and provided personal mentoring. Haushofer's ideas and terms – such as *Lebensraum*, or living space – strongly shaped Hitler's writing in *Mein Kampf*. See, Holger H. Herwig, *The Demon of Geopolitics: How Karl Haushofer 'Educated' Hitler and Hess* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

⁴³Hauner, *India in Axis Strategy*, pp. 22–3.

Sarkar, was also patronised by the Institute. In IR literature, Sarkar is often presented as an Indian exponent of realism, cited mostly for his 1919 article in the *American Political Science Review* on 'Hindu Theory of International Relations', which according to Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan was a 'signature achievement of academic IR theory' from India.⁴⁴ Unlike Das, Sarkar was even willing to defend Nazi antisemitism.⁴⁵

The collaboration of these anti-colonial nationalists with fascist regimes was facilitated by a convergence of interests around anti-British politics. But, as Roman Hayes argues, that Indian leaders found support in Germany is either forgotten or treated with indifference in public memory. Nazis did not get any return on their support, barring Alexander Werth, a minor German bureaucrat who worked closely with Bose in the Special Indian Bureau and made a literary career afterwards by publishing about Bose.⁴⁶ There was however another Nazi who turned up in India and worked closely with the Ministry of External Affairs and Delhi University. His name was Curt Max Prüfer.

Hiring a Nazi diplomat

Towards the end of the Second World War, as Indian independence became imminent, several members of the Indian bureaucracy began to discuss the inevitability of the expansion of the foreign service and India's external footprint.⁴⁷ In 1947, when the External Affairs Department (EAD)⁴⁸ presented a long inventory of countries where India could expand, Nehru advised caution against spreading the newly independent country's commitments and finances too thin. More important countries were prioritised over others in the initial phase. And this included, curiously, a new mission at Berne in Switzerland in 1948.⁴⁹

Although located in a small country, the Swiss mission was important for several reasons.⁵⁰ Switzerland was a neutral country and hence was likely to host important international organisations. But even more salient was its closeness to Germany. Given that India had a military mission in Berlin, Switzerland was seen an important hub for intelligence gathering and technical expertise. For a country like India which needed technical and developmental expertise, the Swiss mission became an important liaison with Swiss industry and German technical experts, several of whom had fled the collapsing Reich and were thus available for hire.⁵¹

Led by a scientifically oriented prime minister, post-independence India placed considerable emphasis on the value of scientific expertise. Early on, Nehru held five ministerial portfolios, including atomic energy, industrial research, natural resources, defence and economic planning, and external affairs. As is well known, he got on famously well with scientists and appointed them his advisors. The significant clout of people like Shanti Bhatnagar, Meghnad Saha, P. C. Mahanobis, and Homi Bhabha, among others, in post-independence developmental schemes

⁴⁴ Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, *The Making of Global International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 100.

⁴⁵ Roy, 'Hakenkreuz, swastika and crescent'.

⁴⁶ Hayes, *Subhas Chandra Bose in Nazi Germany*, p. 248.

⁴⁷ For these discussions, see, F 2(1)-FSP/47: Ministry of External Affairs, National Archives of India, New Delhi (henceforth NAI).

⁴⁸ Soon, the three separate departments of External Affairs, Commonwealth, and Commerce were merged to create a Ministry of External Affairs and Commonwealth Relations, and the name was changed to the Ministry of External Affairs in 1948.

⁴⁹ In addition to its neutral status, Jagat Mehta argues that Switzerland held special importance for Nehru since his wife had spent her last days here. See Jagat S. Mehta, *The Tryst Betrayed: Reflections on Diplomacy and Development* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2015), p. 41.

⁵⁰ Embassy of India, Berne, 'Envoy Excellency – 70 years of India–Switzerland Friendship', available at <https://www.indembassybern.gov.in/docs/1539603018Special%20Edition%20on%20India%20-%20Switzerland.pdf>.

⁵¹ See Desai to Patel, 9 October 1948, In 'Correspondence with H. E. Shri Dhirubhai Desai Indian Ambassador in Switzerland, Private Papers of Sardar Patel, F. 19-II-21-1, pp. 185–92, NAI.

was testimony to this. He also hired foreign experts as his advisors and consultants.⁵² The thirst for 'expertise' marked secular developmentalism as a remedy for all social and political ills. This expert was a figure of tremendous potency – often eroticised.⁵³ This explains why India's minister in Berne, Dhirajlal B. Desai, son of the famous lawyer and Indian politician Bhulabhai Desai, was keen to get German experts to India.⁵⁴ It helped that three months after the opening of the mission, A. C. N. Nambiar joined him.

Nambiar had been a young revolutionary in Europe who, with the likes of Virendranath Chattopadhyay (Chatto) and Jayasurya Naidu – the brother and son respectively of former Indian National Congress president Sarojini Naidu (Nambiar was married to Suhasini, Chatto's and Sarojini's younger sister) – participated in the League against Imperialism in Brussels. Nehru had made his first radical speech at this congress. During Nehru's visit, Chatto recommended to Nehru opening a bureau in Berlin to provide information on technical and practical training in Germany for Indian students. Hence, an Indian Information Bureau was opened in Berlin in 1929 with financial support from the Indian National Congress, and Nambiar was tasked with running it.⁵⁵

In 1933, Nambiar and Jayasurya Naidu were arrested on the day of the burning of the Reichstag. The Nazis wanted to portray it as an international conspiracy. Nambiar's arrest did cause an international incident, as Josiah Wedgwood, the Labour supporter of all causes Indian, raised the issue in the House of Commons.⁵⁶ The British government protested to the German government, and the Indian nationalist press published several anti-German articles, calling for a boycott of German trade.

Curt Prüfer was at this moment a deputy director at the division handling Anglo-American and Oriental Affairs, Abteilung III, in the German Foreign Office (AA). In this capacity, he often exchanged letters with Indian revolutionaries in Germany.⁵⁷ The division was headed by Hans Heinrich Dieckhoff. Prüfer pressed the Prussian interior ministry, headed by Hermann Goering, to release Nambiar. The foreign minister, Konstantin Neurath, also spoke to Goering personally.⁵⁸ Because of these interventions, Nambiar was released after spending 26 days in prison.⁵⁹ Nambiar relocated to Prague soon after.

Later in the summer, when Subhash Bose first visited Berlin, Prüfer was one of the officials who met Bose. In his conversations with Bose, Prüfer treaded a fine line between Hitler's explicit

⁵²Patrick Blackett, for instance, significantly shaped India's defence procurement. He was also key to building the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR) in Bombay. Blackett's best friend, J. B. S. Haldane, worked in India from 1956. Canadian metallurgical scientist W. K. A. Congreve was appointed at the National Metallurgical Laboratory in 1951. Morton Nadler, a communist radio engineer, fleeing his country of birth, the USA, as well as his adopted one, Czechoslovakia, found a temporary home in Nehru's India, where he helped develop India's first computers. Nehru had even offered Robert Oppenheimer Indian citizenship while the latter was being investigated for communist allegiances in America. Christoph Füller-Haimendorph, an Austrian anthropologist who trained under Bronisław Malinowski, fled Austria after its annexation by Nazi Germany and worked briefly as an advisor at the EAD in 1944–5, before becoming a professor at Osmania University.

⁵³See Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Legacies of Bandung: Decolonisation and the politics of culture', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 40:46 (2005), pp. 4812–18. Further, Robert S. Anderson, *Nucleus and Nation: Scientists, International Networks, and Power in India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Samanth Subramanian, *A Dominant Character: The Radical Science and Restless Politics of J. B. S. Haldane* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020); Nikhil Menon, *Planning Democracy: How a Professor, an Institute, and an Idea Shaped India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2022), pp. 82–109; Bakhtiar Dadabhoy, *Homi J. Bhabha: A Life* (New Delhi: Rupa, 2023).

⁵⁴Nazi expertise was popular beyond North and South America. For instance, for Nazi experts in Egypt, see Vyvyan Kinross, *Nazis on the Nile: The German Military Advisers in Egypt 1949–1967* (London: Nomad Publishing, 2022).

⁵⁵Nambiar, Oral History Transcript, NMML.

⁵⁶Nambiar, Oral History Transcript, NMML.

⁵⁷For instance, see his exchanges with the anarchist M. P. T. Acharya in RZ207/80564, Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts, Berlin. Prüfer notes in his diaries that he had been connected with Subhash Bose since 1919 and had good rapport with other Indian revolutionaries such as Chempakaraman Pillai. See Donald M. McKale, *Rewriting History: The Original and Revised World War II Diaries of Curt Prüfer, Nazi Diplomat* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1988), pp. 174–6.

⁵⁸For details, see RZ 202/77416, PA/Abt. III/Politische Beziehungen Indiens zu Deutschland; see also Donald M. McKale, *Curt Prüfer: German Diplomat from the Kaiser to Hitler* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1987), p. 115.

⁵⁹Benarasidas Chaturvedi, 'Unhappy experiences of Mr. A. C. Nambiar', *Modern Review*, 53 (1953), pp. 703–4.

anti-Indian sentiment (Bose believed it was because of his Anglophilia) and the AA's interest in promoting better relations with anti-British Indian nationalists. Shortly before returning to India in early 1936, Bose met Prüfer again and left with the impression that although personally cordial, Prüfer (and Dieckhoff) 'attached little importance to the Indian question'.⁶⁰

Nambiar, in Prague since his exit from Berlin, fled again, this time to France, when Germany occupied Czechoslovakia on 15 March 1939. In 1941, he was summoned by Bose to return to Berlin to work in the Free India Centre. Nambiar, anti-Nazi himself, was reluctant, but Bose's persuasive powers got the better of him. Back in Berlin as Bose's deputy, he worked closely with the Special Indian Bureau of the German Foreign Office. This bureau, unbeknown to Bose and Nambiar, was also a hub of anti-Nazi bureaucrats. (It was run by Alex von Trott who was later prosecuted after the 7 July plot to assassinate Hitler.) Bose appointed Nambiar his minister plenipotentiary in Berlin before leaving for Southeast Asia in 1943.⁶¹ After the war, Nambiar spent two years in detention as a Nazi collaborator, and upon release in 1947 he first settled in Göttingen and then moved to Zurich. At Nehru's behest, Nambiar joined the Indian Legation in Berne as counsellor.

As we have noted, Prüfer had been instrumental in getting Nambiar released from prison. In 1934, Bose had also got Nambiar's exile temporarily rescinded to make a quick trip to Berlin, quite possibly with assistance from Dieckhoff and Prüfer. Prüfer and Nambiar arrived in Berlin (Prüfer from Rio – more on that below) around the same time in 1942, and although Prüfer was not in the Special India Bureau, it is quite likely that he and Nambiar met often in the German Foreign Office in the period between September 1942 and September 1943.⁶² What is certain, however, is that Nambiar and Prüfer reconnected in Switzerland sometime in 1948 and that Nambiar recommended him to Desai.⁶³

Desai wrote about Prüfer with great enthusiasm to the MEA, headed by Nehru, and to the home minister, Vallabhbhai Patel. Prüfer was, he argued, 'an eminent European diplomat' who spoke 16 languages, knew most of Europe's leading people, and was widely respected by them. Prüfer was an authority on international relations and diplomacy. And most importantly, Desai emphasised, Prüfer left the German Foreign Office and Germany because he was opposed to the Nazi regime.⁶⁴ Prüfer was keen to get an appointment, and Desai suggested to the foreign secretary, K. P. S. Menon, that the MEA should hire him to train India's new diplomats. Prüfer had other uses too. In a conversation with Desai, Prüfer had told him he could also help with finding an expert who could prepare an unbreakable code for the foreign service.⁶⁵

In this profile of Prüfer, Desai had garnished some facts disproportionately and enthusiastically bought in on Prüfer's lies on others. Prüfer was hardly a well-known diplomat in Europe. His area of expertise was the Middle East, and it was in his connections with Arab politicians and diplomats that he was valuable. In addition to German, he had achieved fluency in French, English, Italian, and Arabic, and he could understand Turkish, Russian, Spanish, and Portuguese. He was no doubt an exceptional linguist, but 16 languages was a considerable stretch. But it was on his Nazi credentials that Desai's letter was plainly untruthful. To elaborate on this, some biographical detail is necessary.

Born to a lower-middle-class Protestant family on 26 July 1881 in Berlin, Prüfer was among those who benefited from an expanding public university system and the democratisation of higher education. His biographer Donald McKale suggests that the premium that higher education placed on value-neutral science, as opposed to humanist values of education, led to an acquiescence of the

⁶⁰ McKale, *Curt Prüfer*, p. 117.

⁶¹ Nambiar, Oral History Transcript, p. 51.

⁶² On 22 January 1943, Bose gave a farewell party in Berlin which Prüfer attended. Nambiar, as Bose's deputy, would also certainly have been there. See Nachlass Prüfer, Curt, NL230/10, Diary: 22 January 1943, Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts, Berlin (henceforth, PAAA). See also McKale, *Rewriting History*, pp. 174–5.

⁶³ Prüfer's diaries reveal a series of meetings in April 1948. See Box 2, Folder 5, Curt Max Prüfer Papers, 1914–1954, Hoover Institution Library and Archives, Stanford (henceforth Prüfer Papers).

⁶⁴ See F. 28 (9), FSP 48, f.7., MEA, NAI; also Desai to Patel, 9 October 1948.

⁶⁵ F-41-140/50 D III, Ministry of Education, NAI.

younger generations in the nationalist project in Germany. For Prüfer, as for many in his generation, loyalty to the state as a secular, non-ideological entity became the hallmark of good character. Prüfer received his doctorate in Egyptian shadow play and was recruited into German Foreign Office (AA) as a dragoman (translator) in the consulate in Cairo in 1907. Here, he worked under Max von Oppenheim, the Arab-world expert at the consulate. Prüfer did well as a translator, but it was in his role as a spy in the great shadow game between Germany and Britain in Egypt first and in the Middle Eastern region during the war that he gained a deserved reputation as a German Lawrence of Arabia.⁶⁶ Prüfer joined the foreign service after the First World War, and his career flourished in the Weimar republic. He was sent as counsel general to Tiflis (then in the Soviet Union), as minister to Abyssinia (where he stuck friendship with Haile Selassie), and was then promoted to deputy director of the Anglo-American and Oriental Affairs in Abteilung III.

Soon after the Second World War, the majority of German foreign office bureaucrats were absolved and rehabilitated into the mainstream from 1951. The AA officers distanced themselves from the crimes of Nazism by insisting that they did not partake in the policies that led to the holocaust. The argument ran that their expertise was only limited to the international affairs of the Nazi government. As professional bureaucrats, they were merely cogs in the giant wheel. They continued to do their jobs to advance the interests of the German state, mostly unaware of the criminality of Nazi methods. The AA accepted Nazi rule to either moderate or subvert it from within.⁶⁷

In his own diaries and in an unpublished autobiography (written sometime in the late 1940s), Prüfer takes a similar line. He suggests that in working under Nazi rule, he only concerned himself with the international affairs of the Nazi government. Until 1941, Hitler's foreign policy was generally acceptable to him, although personally he was repulsed by both Hitler and the former minister, Ribbentrop. But once he heard about the extermination of Jews, after his return from Brazil, the Nazi regime became an enemy to him. He did not publicly condemn or leave the AA immediately because Germany was then already losing the war, but he left the country in September 1943 and eventually quit in April 1945.⁶⁸

An Independent Historians Commission, set up by the German foreign minister to investigate the AA's role in 2005, has demolished the AA's claims, by showing that the AA was directly involved in Nazi criminal warfare policies and participated in Jewish extermination with 'administrative coldness'.⁶⁹ Likewise, Prüfer's biographer Donald McKale disputes his self-characterisation. McKale shows that Prüfer was a rabid antisemite whose career flourished under the Nazi regime.⁷⁰ He chose to remain part of the Nazi regime after 1933 and supported Hitler because he believed Hitler would remove Jews from Germany. In 1936, he was promoted to director general of personnel at the Foreign Office under the Nazi regime. He also officially joined the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (NSDAP), the Nazi Party, and was sent to Brazil as the Nazi government's ambassador in 1939. Although showing tact and skill, he was implicated in a case involving the use of diplomatic routes for espionage and expelled from Brazil. He was tried *in absentia* in Rio and was sentenced to 20 years in prison.⁷¹ About his stint in Brazil, an internal memo of British

⁶⁶ Curt Prüfer, *Germany's Covert War in the Middle East: Espionage, Propaganda and Diplomacy in World War I*, trans. Kevin Morrow (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), p. 3.

⁶⁷ A key part of this legend of the opposition to Nazis was the July 1944 Hitler assassination plot, which involved three AA officers: Adam von Trott, Ulrich von Hassel, and Hans Bernd von Haeften.

⁶⁸ Autobiography, handwritten and typescript drafts circa 1940–1950, Box 1, Folder 1–3, and Diaries, Box 2, Folder 3 (April–May 1945), Prüfer Papers.

⁶⁹ Conze, Eckart, Norbert Frei, Peter Hayes, and Moshe Zimmermann. *Das Amt und die Vergangenheit: Deutsche Diplomaten im Dritten Reich und in der Bundesrepublik* (Munich: Blessing Verlag, 2010). The report generated wide debate. For a list of sources, see 'Links zur Debatte um das auswärtige Amt und seine Vergangenheit', available at: <https://zeitgeschichte-online.de/themen/links-zur-debatte-um-das-auswaertige-amt-und-seine-vergangenheit>. For earlier works, see Christopher R. Browning, *The Final Solution and the German Foreign Office: A Study of Referat D III of Department Germany 1940–43* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1978); Hans-Jürgen Döscher, *Das Auswärtige Amt im Dritten Reich. Diplomatie im Schatten der 'Endlösung'* (Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 1987).

⁷⁰ McKale, *Curt Prüfer*, p. 1.

⁷¹ 'Espionage jails three in Brazil', *Minneapolis Daily Times* (29 June 1943), p. 8.

intelligence noted that Prüfer 'was a great Nazi' who proudly displayed commendation from Ernst Bohle, the Nazi state secretary for foreign affairs, for his efforts at 'collaboration between the State and the Party'.⁷² After returning from Brazil, Prüfer again joined the Middle Eastern section of the German Foreign Office. By now, Nazi defeat was looking certain. The Reich government was gradually collapsing with a cutback in salaries. Berlin was being bombed by Allied forces. It was only after Prüfer's own house in Berlin was bombed that he considered leaving Germany.⁷³ When he officially left the service just a month before Germany's eventual surrender, it was hardly out of any ethical stance against Nazi rule.

'The Fuhrer', he wrote in his diary in the summer of 1943 with Germany's future in the war looking bleak, 'is a great, very great man, who made our nation – at that time facing ruin – into the most powerful country on earth; and this is an incredibly brief and victorious period of time between 1935 to 1941'.⁷⁴ As German losses piled up, he added: 'All this is terrible for me to see not only because I have always been a person who is very attached to his homeland and always will be, but also because I was sincerely converted to some of the beautiful ideas of National Socialism'.⁷⁵

Even at this point, Prüfer was unrepentant and refused to acknowledge the blame of the German people and the Nazis, including himself, and instead accused Jews and Western democracies for the tragedy that befell Germany.⁷⁶ His immediate reaction to the news of the extermination of Jews was certainly of shock, but he showed no sympathy towards the victims. Instead, he demonstrated a mix of 'apathy and opportunism'. He was alarmed at how this would cause hatred against Germans as Jews were already being seen with sympathy.⁷⁷ He also moved in quickly to knowingly purchase a property in Baden-Baden from which Jews had been evicted.⁷⁸

McKale notes that there was a mix of opportunism, naivety, and conviction in the decision of German foreign service officials who remained part of the Nazi regime. For Prüfer, it was also because he shared a hatred for Jews with the Nazis.⁷⁹ He may not have been a wholehearted convert to Hitler's racial theories; in fact, after attending a farewell reception in honour of Subhash Bose, he wrote that Hitler's racialised views of Indians made the Nazi ideology in its purity unsuitable for world politics in which alliances must be forged with one's enemies.⁸⁰ But Prüfer was convinced that Jews and communists were together responsible for the ruin of Germany. As soon as the war ended, Prüfer was dismayed that the world was making the German population pay, who in his view were themselves victims of the Schutzstaffel (SS) terror and hence were not responsible. In May 1945, once Hitler was dead, Prüfer had already moved on. 'Europe needs to forget everything' and unite against Bolshevism, an ideology far worse than Nazism or fascism. All the talk of war crimes must stop', he wrote. The world needed 'kindness and reconciliation'.⁸¹

His move to Switzerland had reduced him to penury. Once the Nazi regime collapsed, he lost his pension and was placed in a state of limbo between being a refugee and an émigré. The Swiss government prevented him from getting a job.⁸² However, despite the Western powers insisting on repatriating all Nazi-era officials, the Swiss government let him remain since he was in the second rung of Nazi officials and not an active propagandist. He had to ask for money from former colleagues and friends, which included the Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie.⁸³ In dire circumstances,

⁷²See, 'Pruefer, Dr. Curt', KV-2-3114, f. 17a, National Archives, Kew, UK. His sentence was later cancelled because of his diplomatic immunity and the impossibility of carrying it out, since Prüfer had already left Brazil.

⁷³McKale, *Curt Prüfer*, p. 174.

⁷⁴McKale, *Rewriting History*, p. 114.

⁷⁵McKale, *Rewriting History*, p. 115.

⁷⁶McKale, *Curt Prüfer*, p. 1.

⁷⁷Nachlass Prüfer, Curt, NL230/10, Diary: 21 November 1942, PAAA.

⁷⁸McKale, *Curt Prüfer*, p. 175.

⁷⁹McKale, *Curt Prüfer*, p. xii.

⁸⁰Nachlass Prüfer, Curt, NL230/10, Diary: 22 January 1943, PAAA.

⁸¹Box 2, Folder 6 (May 1945), Prüfer Papers.

⁸²Box 2, Folder 4 and 5, Prüfer Papers.

⁸³McKale, *Curt Prüfer*, p. 184.

and in utter humiliation, he searched for jobs. There was one fleeting offer in Argentina which he considered.⁸⁴ In such a situation, on 14 April 1948, after nearly three years of being jobless, when Desai and Nambiar offered to send him to Delhi, he wrote in his diary: 'this is too beautiful to be true.'⁸⁵

Prüfer in Delhi

On 25 October 1948, Curt Max Prüfer arrived in New Delhi with his wife and son, and a large inventory of 28 boxes. It was clear that he was setting up for the long term. Desai had given him to understand that he would be employed for, minimally, three years, with every chance of a longer-term extension. Contrary to his verbal assurances, however, Desai presented him with only a one-year contract on paper. Desai assured that this was a standard procedure.⁸⁶

Desai and Nambiar had made a forceful case to the MEA for recruiting Prüfer. Nambiar, who visited India in the summer of 1948 and was close to Nehru, conferred with MEA officials in person. Someone like Prüfer, with considerable foreign office experience, brought in significant institutional knowledge. Barring very few Indian Civil Service (ICS) officers, who had served abroad in the colonial period, the knowledge of even mundane issues such as protocol in the ministry was limited.

The MEA was also then internally discussing plans for training newly recruited Indian foreign service officers. There was no tradition of foreign service training in the colonial bureaucracy. The basic nature of the foreign service training was different from other administrative and allied services. A foreign service officer needed working expertise in international relations, diplomacy, international law, and foreign languages which other services did not require. But given that there was a lack of expertise in India on these subjects, it was thought valuable for foreign service officers to go abroad for training.⁸⁷

After months of discussions between different governmental departments (where concerns were raised about special treatment for Indian Foreign Service [IFS] officers), the following training schedule was decided upon: three months of preliminary training in India which would include some basic lectures on India's part in International Affairs, position as a world power, commercial needs and potentialities as well as a primer on what to expect as a trainee. Following this, the trainees were to be sent abroad for 18 months of training. The first nine months were to be spent in Oxford or Cambridge, where the trainee would take subjects in modern history, politics, and economics. The lack of imagination of the Indian bureaucracy and their elitism was quite evident in these recommendations. Abroad meant only Britain (and later the United States), but only Oxford and Cambridge were considered worthy enough to train Indian diplomats (a suggestion to consider even the LSE was summarily dismissed!).⁸⁸ Studying in elite English universities was also deemed an opportunity for the foreign service officers to learn to speak idiomatic English. The second half of these 18 months was to be spent in learning one of the four foreign languages (French, German, Russian, and Spanish), in a country where these were officially spoken. Eventually, the trainee would spend one year of training at union or state governments.

This emphasis on going abroad irked several members of Nehru's cabinet as well as bureaucrats from other services. Akbar Hydari, in a note, protested that 18 months abroad 'will in majority of the cases be anything more than an attractive holiday at State expense.'⁸⁹ The MEA was asked to

⁸⁴Letter to Frau Pappritz, 28 January 1949, f. 658; letter to Zachlin, 28 January 1949, f. 666; in Nachlass Prüfer NL 230/6, PAAA.

⁸⁵Box 2, Folder 6 (14 April 2048), Prüfer Papers.

⁸⁶He was also offered an impressively high salary of 2,000 rupees and spacious accommodation near the university for free. There was literally no one at this level of salary in Delhi University at the time. See F. 1-34/48 D III, Ministry of Education, NAI.

⁸⁷F. 6(3)—FSP/47 and F. 6(4)—FSP/47: MEA, NAI.

⁸⁸British service manuals were consulted for almost every aspect of service composition.

⁸⁹See F. 6 (1)—FSP/47, MEA, NAI.

make efforts to source the expertise on those subjects for which the officers were going abroad. More importantly, if foreign service-related courses and languages were taught in India already, this would enormously improve the pool of foreign service candidates. Consequently, the MEA encouraged Indian universities to start courses on International Affairs and Law as well as language courses.⁹⁰

It is here that Prüfer's significantly glossed credentials came in handy. He was presented as a leading expert on international affairs and law. The MEA considered this a good opportunity to hire someone with specialisation in International Affairs, Law, and several languages. The MEA, however, did not have the money to spare for this position. So Foreign Secretary K. P. S. Menon approached Delhi vice-chancellor Maurice Gwyer.⁹¹

Three years previously, in 1945, the university had first sought to start a political science programme. Delhi was soon to be the capital of independent India. A new vision required new politics and new ways of understanding it. But as is the trouble with visions, they only survive when money matches them. The university, busy with expanding its other departments, felt that politics was too lowly a subject and couldn't prioritise a chair in Political Science. The scale of ambition was pared down from professorship to readership, but no suitable candidate could be found. Angadipuram Appadorai, one of the most suitable candidates, was asked but refused on account of his work as the secretary of the newly opened Indian Council for World Affairs (ICWA).⁹²

There these matters lay, until the MEA came with this proposal to the university. International Affairs was close enough to Political Science, so to the university it seemed like a good idea. In addition to the fact that this would facilitate close connections between the MEA and the university, the intellectual reasons for why Delhi University approved are not noted. But an educated speculation may help. In general, International Affairs, generally taught as a history of European diplomacy, was included as a subject in several Political Science programmes (in Lucknow, Allahabad, Benaras, Agra, and Lahore) in India.⁹³ In fact, some of the early IR works from India came from established political scientists, such as V. S. Ram and B. M. Sharma. The first Political Science department in India was started in Lucknow in 1922 by the Harvard-educated V. S. Ram.⁹⁴ The Indian Political Science Association was established in 1938, and its flagship journal, *Indian Journal of Political Science*, published on several IR-related topics in its first decade (1939–48).⁹⁵ Prüfer brought in actual practical experience of European diplomacy as well as enough understanding of history, international law, and languages. A chair of International Affairs was thus likely to mark out IR as a separate subject from Political Science in which Delhi University (DU) would be the pioneer.

Once he received the university's nod, Menon approached the Ministry of Education. The education ministry approved funding for a year, knowing that the proposal was backed by the prime minister. The last hurdle was securing the Ministry of Home Affairs' (MHA) approval to hire a non-Indian. Rules made it plain that only in exceptional circumstances could a foreigner be hired and that too on a minimum period of contract (hence the one-year contract Desai offered Prüfer against the latter's expectations). Regular procedure required a candidate to appear before a public service commission. This was classified as an 'exceptional circumstance', and strictures were waived for Prüfer. An MHA official noted dryly: 'the post is not being created to fulfil the needs of Delhi University, but instead to provide Dr. Pruffer [*sic*] an appointment who will be adviser to the MEA&CR.'⁹⁶

⁹⁰ See F. 6(4)-FSP/47, MEA, NAI.

⁹¹ F. 1-32/48 D III, Ministry of Education, NAI and F. 9(9)-FSP/48, MEA, NAI.

⁹² 'University of Delhi Amendment to Clause (1) State 22 Regarding Addition to the Faculty', F. 59-57/48 D III, Ministry of Education, NAI.

⁹³ J. S. Bains, 'State of political science in India', *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 32:4 (1971), pp. 393–444.

⁹⁴ C. P. Barthwal, 'Professor V.S. Ram: The founder of political science discipline in India', *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 74:4 (2013), pp. 793–8; V. Shiva Ram, 'Presidential address', *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 3:4 (1942), pp. 467–90.

⁹⁵ See Davis, Thakur, and Vale, *Imperial Discipline*, chapter 6.

⁹⁶ F. 28 (9), FSP 48, MEA, NAI.

Initially, Delhi University seemed keen on benefiting from Prüfer's expertise. The university hoped that his position would lead to a proper International Relations (IR) programme. In preliminary discussions with him, along with the deans of faculties of History and Law, S. N. Sen and L.R. Subramanian respectively, a proposal was drafted towards the creation of an International Relations programme jointly organised by these departments.⁹⁷ But it was clear that neither Prüfer nor anyone else knew what an IR programme would entail.

In a long letter to Walter Zachlin (a fellow former AA diplomat), Prüfer wrote:

I am a professor at this venerable institute [Delhi University] for 'International affairs'. I don't know what that actually means in clear terms, and neither does anyone else. We have not yet succeeded in drawing up a syllabus for my colleges that would not overlap with that of historians and lawyers.⁹⁸

And he continued:⁹⁹

you can tell students all kinds of things even without the shackles of a curriculum, as the example of England and America proves, where 'international affairs' has long been taught at universities. There seems to be a kind of scientific cesspool into which everything that cannot be properly accommodated in the relationships between peoples and states, especially under international law, is thrown into it.

In another letter, he argued that International Affairs:

can probably best be defined as the history of current international relations, especially with regard to the question of international law. In addition, it also includes the treatment of diplomatic and consular technology, as auxiliary sciences that play into the area include comparative constitutional law, sociology, economics and finance, geography, etc.¹⁰⁰

With ideas so unspecific, it was no surprise that the university decided to shelve its proposal on account of it being 'unpracticable'. Among other things, his proposal envisaged creating large number of new teaching posts. A cash-strapped university reconsidered its plans of investing in setting up a more sure-footed Department of Political Science with a postgraduate programme. International Relations, Vice Chancellor Maurice Gwyer noted, could be embraced as a specialised course within Political Science.¹⁰¹

Prüfer was now included in the university's plans to start a language school. A proposal for a School of Modern Languages lists Prüfer as a lecturer for Arabic.¹⁰² At the MEA, he was tasked with devising a series of lectures for foreign service officers. The first batch of officers had already gone to the UK, so he tested his course on the second batch of 12 probationers who were in the first three months of training. His students included J. S. Mehta, Leilamani Naidu, U. S. Bajpai, and A. K. Sen, among others. His lectures were on international law, practical diplomacy, consular practice, and geopolitics.¹⁰³

⁹⁷F. 9(9) FSP/48, f. 2, MEA, NAI.

⁹⁸Letter to Zachlin, 26 February 1949, f. 666, Nachlass Prüfer NL 230/6, PAAA (translated, original in German).

⁹⁹In another letter, he thought International Affairs was a rather appealing expression for modern history. Letter to Melcher, 6 March 1949, f. 671, Nachlass Prüfer NL 230/6, PAAA.

¹⁰⁰Letter to Schellert, 19 April 1949, f. 694, Nachlass Prüfer NL 230/6, PAAA.

¹⁰¹Curiously, in the course designed for International Relations, Europe was studied for its diplomatic history, while other regions – West Asia, East Asia, the Commonwealth, and the USA – were studied only for their general history. In other words, Europe was the only agent of history. Other papers were on International Organisations, World Geography and International Economics, International Law, and Imperialism, Colonial Evolution and Independence. See 'Note by DU Vice Chancellor, 22/12/49' ff. 47–51, in File No. 9(9) FSP 1948, MEA, NAI.

¹⁰²F-28-70/50 D III, Ministry of Education, NAI.

¹⁰³File No. F. 9 (9) FSP/48, Ministry of External Affairs, NAI.

The sudden appearance of a German professor did not go unnoticed on the embassy circuit. British intelligence enquired if this was the same notorious 'Kurt Prüfer' (*sic*) who had been a 'keen Nazi' and ambassador in Brazil. The British had thought him to be either dead or close to dead on account of advanced tuberculosis. It took almost a year for the British high commission in India to finally confirm, but by the time they did, the Commonwealth Relations Office thought it was too late to alert Nehru's government. The Indian government would not care in the least about his 'good Nazi' record, unless some connection could be drawn between Prüfer and the Soviet Union.¹⁰⁴ This was a curious conclusion and seemed more in line with what the British government rather than the Indian government cared for. In other words, the British would have cared more if Prüfer was spying for Russia rather than if he had a Nazi record.

Meanwhile, in Delhi, Prüfer grew increasingly bored and dissatisfied. His deteriorating health was a constant source of trouble. He now complained that the university faculty despised him as a foreigner and gave him the cold shoulder. He was hardly given anything to teach, his proposals were rejected, and he was totally ignored.¹⁰⁵ The university authorities had their own litany of complaints to the MEA. Prüfer's knowledge of international law, a subject he chose to teach, was evidently poor, making him unsuitable to teach that subject. Prüfer was also nearly deaf. The MEA didn't feel any differently. K. P. S. Menon noted that Prüfer has 'not proved particularly effective, whether as Professor or as an unofficial adviser to the Foreign Office. He has not been keeping well; and it is perhaps in his interests that he should not stay in India much longer.'¹⁰⁶

Just as the MEA and DU were inclined to discontinue his services after the end of his one-year contract, Prüfer raised objections that he had moved to India on an understanding that he would be employed on a three years' basis. He informed them that he had sold a flat in Geneva to the Indian legation without any premium, which would come to about 25–30,000 francs if he had sold it on the market. He had also given his own furniture to the Indian mission for about 20,000 francs. It seems that Desai had only paid him 10,000 francs and still owed Prüfer the remaining. Further, he had also given up on an offer in Argentina in the hope of a three-year contract. Desai responded that he had paid the Prüfers enough so saw no reason for his complaining.¹⁰⁷ Here, Prüfer was considerably stretching the truth. As is clear from his letters to his friends, Desai had agreed to buy the house and its furniture at a time when it was almost being pawned. In no way would Prüfer have received market price.¹⁰⁸ The MEA, however, sympathised with Prüfer. The mission at Berne had already showed some financial irregularities, and Desai, they felt, had let them down badly.¹⁰⁹ The MEA felt morally bound to extend his contract. It approached the Ministry of Education to extend his contract for another year.

Another year passed. Prüfer's contract was yet again to expire, and yet another series of letters passed between the ministries of Education, Home, Finance and External Affairs. This time, Delhi University flatly refused to be burdened with Prüfer. He was of no use to them, and they preferred to hire another visiting professor from the Watumull Foundation, Pitman B. Potter.¹¹⁰ Following DU's opposition, the Ministry of Education declined to sanction Prüfer's costs. The MEA then proposed sharing costs with the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA). He was doing work at the Historical and Research section of the MEA and could usefully be employed to deliver lectures to

¹⁰⁴ 'Pruefer, Dr. Curt', KV-2-3114, f. 25a, National Archives, Kew, UK.

¹⁰⁵ See, Box 2, Folders 7 and 8, Prüfer Papers.

¹⁰⁶ Note by KPS Menon, 26 August 1949; File No. 9(9) FSP 1948, f. 16) (also, File No. 9(9)–FSP/48, f. 31), NAI, MEA.

¹⁰⁷ For these discussions, see File No. 9(9) FSP 1948, and F 36 (16)–49/C.S., MEA, NAI.

¹⁰⁸ Prüfer to Wiehl, 19 November 1948, f. 631, Nachlass Prüfer NL 230/6, PAAA.

¹⁰⁹ The MEA enquired if restoration of the flat, reselling the furniture, and passage back would restore status. The Prüfers said no. They would not be allowed entry back since they were refugees; sale of the lease would not bring the same premium as it got a year ago. See File No. 9(9) FSP 1948), Ministry of External Affairs, NAI.

¹¹⁰ The Watumull Foundation was established in 1942 in the USA by an Indian Sindhi merchant, Gobindram J. Watumull, and provided support for educational activities to Indian students.

Indian Administrative Service and IFS probationers at the MHA-controlled Indian Administrative School, the MEA reasoned. The MHA curtly declined.¹¹¹

Running out of options, the MEA approached the Finance Ministry for funds. Prüfer, they argued, would assist in protocol and other matters where his expertise was important. He was also available for training foreign service probationers during their attachment to the foreign service. Joint Secretary of Finance Brij Narayan noted in the file: 'The EA Ministry had also really no job for him but this is another case of a "white elephant". We can ill-afford such luxuries in these days of financial stringency. But it would be awkward to fire him so no option but to extend his contract.'¹¹² But the file was rejected by the Finance Secretary, K. R. K. Menon. He noted on the file: 'The Historical section of the E.A. Ministry where it is proposed to shove Dr. Prüfer into is headed by a top-ranking officer of Addl. Secretary's status, and I take it that it is not E.A. Ministry's case that he needs assistance in the form of a dilapidated professor.'¹¹³

Eventually, the two secretaries, both Menons – K. P. S. and K. R. K. – met to discuss the matter and came to a more convenient solution. The MEA agreed to employ Prüfer exclusively as an advisor in the MEA for three months, after which Prüfer was to be discharged with *ex gratia* of 10,000 rupees, as compensation for the presumed loss of income. Prüfer accepted this, but only grudgingly.¹¹⁴ Prüfer had arrived with much fanfare in India in October 1948. Two years and three months later, he left with his wife, disgruntled and dissatisfied.¹¹⁵

On the way back from India, Prüfer wrote a long note in his diary. His stay in India was now an achingly bitter memory. In finding who to blame, he trained his guns primarily on Nehru, who was also the foreign minister, and his 'alcoholic and communist' aide, Krishna Menon.¹¹⁶ According to Prüfer, Krishna Menon had fiercely agitated against Prüfer's appointment, but Nehru, who hated Subhash Bose and felt inferior to him, had agreed only as an initial concession to the Bose-aligned revolutionaries. Nehru was still fearful that Bose, whose death was mired in controversy, might return. But as the possibilities of Bose's return subsided, Nehru's courage grew and along with the English influence, through the Mountbattens, he became more forceful in pushing people like Prüfer out of the system.¹¹⁷ In general, Prüfer argued that it was the English influence on the Anglophile elite such as the ICS and English officers such as Maurice Gwyer that made any German ideas and people suspect in the Indian system.

Prüfer had smoked on the Delhi rumour mill,¹¹⁸ for there is no evidence to suggest that either Nehru or Krishna Menon tried to sabotage him. The MEA officials, if at all, tried excessively hard to retain him, despite his failing health and lack of defined expertise. But this persecution complex was certainly aided by opaque communication from both the MEA and DU about his role. Prüfer returned to Germany, made possible by the rehabilitation of former AA officers, settled in Baden-Baden, and died in January 1959.

Conclusion

Disciplinary histories of American IR often highlight the German émigré influence;¹¹⁹ the Indian version too has a German birth. But what do we make of it? In discussing the question of origins,

¹¹¹File No. 9(9) FSP 1948, MEA, NAI.

¹¹²File No. 9(9) FSP 1948, MEA, NAI.

¹¹³KRK Menon noted on 3 August 1950, f. 48, File No. 9(9) FSP 1948), MEA, NAI.

¹¹⁴The Indian government, however, deducted income tax from his income, which did not please him in the least.

¹¹⁵His son, Olaf, who had grown to despise his father's politics, stayed back in Delhi to work for Air India Radio. He later worked in the department of archaeology, where he was in a team that made 'the most remarkable' discovery of Sohan-type chopper cropping tools in Beas and Sutlej valleys. He eventually went on to do a doctorate at Harvard and from 1968 onwards taught anthropology at Kent State University.

¹¹⁶Krishna Menon was actually a teetotaler, but a notorious tea addict, consuming nearly three dozen cups of tea in a day.

¹¹⁷Box 2, Folder 8, Prüfer Papers.

¹¹⁸He credits all his information to an unidentified secretary in the government.

¹¹⁹Rösch, *Émigré Scholars*.

Friedrich Nietzsche refers to *pudenda origo* (shameful origins): the idea that all truths are birthed in something less truthful or dirty. What do we make of the *pudenda origo* of International Relations in India. Or should we instead consider Edward Said's counsel: 'There is', he wrote, 'always the danger of too much reflection upon beginnings.'¹²⁰ In other words, should we consider this – to return to van Zyl Slabbert – a conspiracy or a cock-up?

We must rule out the conspiracy. There is nothing to suggest that Prüfer, his work, or his ideas had any lingering influence on Indian IR. In fact, his traces have been so definitely erased – not a single contemporary or later account mentions him – that it is the erasure rather than influence that seems more conspiratorial. Subsequently, the first IR programme was set up in 1955 at the Indian School of International Studies in Delhi.¹²¹

Importantly, after Prüfer's failed experiment, Delhi University chose to opt for a Political Science department in which the American political scientist Normal D. Palmer and Harman Singh, returned from America, a former student of V. S. Ram, played an instrumental role.¹²²

A cock-up then? The factlet on its own seems bizarre, trivial, and startling. But its extraordinary occurrence is possible through an intersection of peripatetic anti-colonial networks, the institutional logics of ministries and universities, and the foraging nature of post-colonial developmentalism, chasing expertise. Understanding Prüfer's arrival in India therefore needs to draw on various connected histories of anti-colonial nationalism, institutional formations, and ideas of expertise. Consequently, it shows how at least one of the 'birth' stories of International Relations in India is adhocist, i.e. institutional and contingent, rather than intellectual. Having initially failed to start a Political Science department, Delhi University offered a chair of IR mostly with a view of collaborating with the Ministry of External Affairs. International Affairs, in Prüfer's words, was 'a scientific cesspool', an undefined mix of history, law, and diplomacy. International Affairs became a term of mysterious heft whose meanings and terms were unclear to everyone. And indeed, it was this undefined nature of the discipline and of his own expertise that allowed him to be hired in the first place.

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¹²⁰ Edward Said, 'Beginnings', *Salmagundi*, 2:4(8) (1968), pp. 36–55 (p. 53).

¹²¹ The ICWA played an instrumental role in establishing this as a constituent unit of Delhi University. See T. C. A. Raghavan and Vivek Mishra, *Sapru House: A Story of Institution-Building in World Affairs* (New Delhi: ICWA, 2021).

¹²² See File No. 9(9) FSP 1948, MEA, NAI; and J. S. Bains, 'Political science at the University of Delhi', in J. S. Bains and R. B. Jain (eds), *Political Science in Transition: Essays in Honour of Professor Harnam Singh* (New Delhi: Gitanjali Prakashan, 1981), pp. 264–81.