

Civilian prisoners of South Asia in Germany during World War II in German archives

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South Asian civilian prisoners in German captivity during World War II have received very little scholarly attention. Whereas there has been extensive research on the South Asian soldiers who have joined Subhas Chandra Bose's Azad Hind Fauj and preliminary research on ordinary captives who had either chosen not to join the Indian Legion, as it was called in Germany, or were considered unfit for it, South Asian civilian prisoners do not play a role in either of these historiographies. Yet, these captives, mainly Indian seamen working for the British Merchant or Royal Navy or European shipping companies, inhabited, for instance, the barracks of the camps in Sandbostel and Westerimke in northern Lower Saxony and the make-shift arrangements in Hamburg and Bremen.

In this essay, I will first outline the historic context of South Asian civilian captivity in Northern Germany by identifying, locating and reconstructing the formation of the different camps and internment facilities. Second, I draw attention to the sources, mapping the archival landscape and pointing out the relevance of each holding within the overarching framework of the MIDA project and its Digital Archival Reflexicon. Although I am digitally reordering the sources along the pertinence principle, the provenance of the holdings is not lost as I start each section with situating the respective holding in the structure of its physical repository.

Throughout the paper, I reflect and comment on possible vantage points for historic scholarship in this under researched field of study as they are emerging out of this tentative survey on the material.

Campscape

Stalag X B Sandbostel – Ilag and Milag

Initially, the civilian prisoners were interned in the Kriegsgefangenen-Mannschafts-Stammlager X B Sandbostel, coined Stalag X B in military jargon. The camp, falling under the administration of Wehrkreis (war area) X, encompassing Schleswig-Holstein, Hamburg, Bremen and northern Lower Saxony, was erected in 1939 close to the village Sandbostel, lending its name to the facility (Ehresmann 2015). It was in operation throughout the war until its liberation by the British army on April 29, 1945, having hosted at least 313 000 civil and military prisoners, thousands of whom died from diseases and physical exhaustion. Soviet prisoners in particular suffered from the disastrous conditions and mistreatment under intentional disregard of the Geneva Convention. Stalag X B was divided into Ilag (Internierungslager) and Milag (Marine-Internierungslager). Whereas

both hosted officers and ranks of the Merchant as well as the Royal Navy, colonial seamen were only to be interned in Ilag. There were around 660 colonial seamen categorized as Chinese, Indian, Arab and Malayan in October 1941.¹ Most of them were captured at sea when the German forces seized their ships. During an inspection of the camp in July 1941 by the International Red Cross, especially the hygienic facilities in both camps were considered absolutely insufficient and the prisoners were observed to be lacking warm uniforms and underwear.² With the harsh German winter approaching, the German military tried to negotiate an agreement with Italy to send the civilians to one of their internment camps. However, the Italian authorities withdrew their initial offer, claiming to have exhausted their capacities. Instead, the whole Ilag and Marlag branch of Sandbostel was relocated to a new camp 25 km towards the south, now being referred to as Marlag and Milag Nord.

Marlag and Milag Nord in Westerimke

In the course of the relocation, around 380 Indian lascars, along with the other so-called coloured seamen, were transferred to Westerimke close to Bremen in October 1941. The new facility consisted of two camps especially created to accommodate captives of the British Merchant Navy, called Marlag and Milag (Marine-Internierungslager). There, the Indians were accommodated in the Milag branch of the camp, their numbers now figuring at 533.³ As this camp, too, was ill equipped and South Asians considered unfit to last the German winter, their deportation to Italy was again debated in December 1941. In February of 1942, however, 486 Indian civilians were still listed on the camp documents.⁴

In 1943, another small camp was built in their vicinity to accommodate the bulk of Indian, Adenese, Chinese and Burmese seamen. Some 630 seamen moved out of Milag to what came to be called the Inder Lager (Thomas 1995, p. 105). Similar to the so-called Halfmoon Camp in Zossen-Wünsdorf during World War I, the South Asians were separated from their British officers and exposed to pro-German propaganda in an attempt to find allies among the colonial subjects (Thomas 1995, p. 273). Not only did this endeavour prove unsuccessful as only a few seamen were recruited to the Indian Legion, but the commanders of the camp met with various incidents of passive resistance from the inmates, both in Sandbostel and Westerimke (Thomas 1995, 272f; Lane 1990, 284). The damp climate of Northern Germany, lack of fuel, food and sufficient clothing, as well as the disregard of the dietary customs of the predominantly Muslim inhabitants of the Inder Lager made everyday life an unpleasant experience. Red Cross Parcels with rations barely reached the camp and the highly censored and disrupted correspondence between the prisoners and the outside world further added to the atmosphere of resentment and isolation among the captives. While extra rations were indispensable, the Indian Red Cross in Simla sent books, musical instruments and games. A theatre was constructed and several plays were performed with full musical accompaniment and religious routines were maintained as far as the conditions allowed it (Thomas 1995, 275).

Bremen and Hamburg harbour

In addition to the South Asian seamen interned in Sandbostel and Westerimke, there were another approximately 360 Indian lascars held captive in Hamburg and Bremen. All of them employees of the Hansa Line, a German shipping company predominantly calling at

South Asian ports, they were detained in September 1939, when England's declaration of war to Germany led to a complete lock down of all economic relations with India. At that time, seven fully manned ships were anchored in Bremen and two at the Hamburg port. As their ships were denied voyage, the South Asian seamen found themselves out of employment and grounded in Germany. They were accommodated either in make-shift arrangements in and around Bremen city, where they were maintained and guarded by the Hansa Line, or stayed on two small barges anchored in Hamburg port.⁵ As far as Bremen is concerned, the Hansa Line ensured that they were provided with food prepared in agreement with their religious beliefs and were even allowed to venture out into the city in groups of ten.⁶ Their support for the *lascars* hints to the ambiguous situation certain parts of the shipping industry found itself in during the war. Heavily relying on their international workforce, they were less supportive of the nationalist cause as, for example, the heavy industry. Some seamen then found new employment on Dutch steamers. Nevertheless, at least two died in local hospitals.⁷ Upon request of their former employer, they were given warm clothes from the fundus of the local police. In Hamburg, the situation was considerably less amicable as the barges did not provide sufficient shelter from the winter climate for the initial 94 lascars. By October 1939, already half of the crew was suffering from pneumatic diseases.⁸ On February 14, 1940, the remaining 65 lascars in Hamburg were joined with the 215 still staying in Bremen from where they were transported to the Netherlands. They were set free on the condition that they would not join enemy service.⁹

Sources

The relevant holdings regarding South Asian civilian prisoners in Germany during World War II are spread across three different German state archives and one British collection. As this is a preliminary overview, I do not rule out the possibility that there will be more material in other archives, for example in the archives of the International Tracing Service in Bad Arolsen.¹⁰

Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts

Quantitatively, the most significant material is stored in the Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts (the Political Archive of the Federal Foreign Office) [PAAA]. It is structured according to the provenance principle, reflecting the administrative structure of the German Foreign Office at a given point in time. One branch caters only to the bureaucratic output of the administration of the Third Reich. Within this branch, the material on the South Asian captives is found in five files in the holding Rechtsangelegenheiten (legal matters) under the sub-section Kriegsrecht (martial law) / Völkerrecht (international law). The material is particularly relevant because it confirms that Indian civilians were first interned in Sandbostel before they were transferred to Westerimke, which has eluded historical scholarly attention so far. Perhaps most strikingly, the files contain dense material on eight Indian merchants from Sind, permanently residing in Gibraltar, who had been captured in 1940 in the Indian Ocean on the S. S. Kemmeline on their way to India after having been evacuated from Gibraltar. They were interned as civil prisoners first in Stalag X B and later in Marlag and Milag Nord. Eager to be released to Tangier, Spanish Morocco, where they had long term

business relations, their correspondence with the Indian Merchant Association in Tangier, various consulates and embassies, the Swiss legation and, of course, the German authorities, make for a fascinating case study for the micro-history of camp politics. As they discuss the financial, geographic and legal aspects of their pending repatriation, insights into international war-time diplomacy from a bottom-up perspective can be gained. Despite their relentless efforts, the British-Indians were still in German captivity in March 1945.

Further, the holding contains internment lists of captives of both Stalag X B and Marlag and Milag Nord, as well as camp inspection reports of the International Red Cross in Geneva and the Swiss legation. Especially the latter are valuable sources as they provide rare insights into the everyday life of the camps and the conditions of internment of South Asian civilian prisoners viewed through the lens of international humanitarian organizations.

Imperial War Museum, London

The holding in the PAAA is interlinked with a holding in the Imperial War Museum, London. Although the private papers of Captain H. W. Jones have been studied by scholars like Tony Lane (Lane 1990) and Gabe Thomas (Thomas 1995) and do not strictly fall under the category of modern India in German archives, I am listing them here because they are crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the civilian campscape of World War II. Captain H. W. Jones, Chief Officer of the Harrisons Line's S. S. Dalesman, manned with an Indian crew, was exceptional in a number of ways. Not only had he learned Hindustani, the lingua-franca of Northern India to communicate with his staff, but also volunteered to leave the officer's camp to join the Indians as their Confidence Officer. At the Inder Lager, he applied his energies to make life as tolerable as possible for the South Asians, who suffered more than the Europeans from the impositions of captivity. He intervened on their behalf for the proper consideration of their dietary requirements in line with their religious beliefs, made sure they were supplied with essentials, clothing and blankets, helped with the correspondence in and out of the camp in the face of the German censor, took responsibility of the camp wages and ensured a minimum of leisure activities to be available for the inmates (Thomas 1995, 274-6). His private papers, stored in two cardboard boxes, contain his copious notes about life in the Inder Lager. He kept nominal lists of the Indian but also other Asian, Caribbean and African captives, a voluminous collection of correspondences and petitions on behalf of the South Asians to their relatives at home as well as the local authorities¹¹, balance sheets, bills and receipts for rations, cinema tickets, sale of effects of the deceased and camp wages,¹² a camp diary of 1942, photographs, grocery lists and daily menus, and notes he had taken during the visit of the Swiss Legation who inspected Marlag in April 1944.¹³ After the war, he brought everything back to England where it eventually came to rest in the custody of the Imperial War Museum after his death.

Bremen and Hamburg State Archive

Although the material in the holdings of the Bremen State Archive and the Hamburg State Archive is less voluminous than the one in PAAA, their holdings are nevertheless important as they open a window into the politics of internment outside the realm of the

traditional prison camps. The 360 lascars from Bombay and Calcutta of the Hansa Line were accommodated in small barges in the port or housing shelters in the port neighbourhood within close proximity of the local urban population.

In the Bremen State Archive, the file on the captured South Asian seamen is stored alongside documents on foreign workforce, social security, labour issues, the Jewish question, air raid shelter and prisoners of war as part of the holding Senator für Inneres, Allgemeine Registratur in Bremen between 1919 – 1956.¹⁴ The file itself, labelled *Ausländerpolizeiliche Behandlung indischer Staatsangehöriger 1939 – 1940* (treatment of Indian nationals by the foreigners police), contains the correspondence between the National Socialist police forces in Berlin and Bremen, the mayor of Bremen and his senator of the interior as well as its Hamburg equivalent, the *Hauptvereinigung der deutschen Getreide- und Futtermittelwirtschaft* (the German grain and feedstuff main association) and representatives of the Hansa Line about the treatment of the captured Indian lascars. As the camp for civil prisoners in Sandbostel was not yet in operation, the placement of the South Asian seamen was a complicated and pressing issue for the authorities. In a request to the Bremen police, the Hansa Line emphatically urges the former to keep the lascars in Bremen and in the custody of the shipping line, as only from here they could ensure their proper treatment including the preparation of meals along their religious beliefs and regional background and their safeguarding against cold weather.¹⁵ Issues revolved around the import and clearance of rice and tea by the customs and around finding an acceptable and affordable location for their accommodation. A grocery list dividing the crew between people from Calcutta and Bombay sheds light into the respective dietary requirements from the perspective of their employers. A comprehensive enumeration of all lascars interned, stating their names, professions, age and place of recruitment, allows insights into the social composition of the maritime workforce. Eventually, it was agreed to deport the Indians to England. The Hamburg and Bremen lascars were pooled and sent by train to be handed over to the British vice consul on February 14 of 1940 in Rotterdam.¹⁶ As opposed to the merchant captured on the *S. S. Kemmendine*, the Bremen and Hamburg lascars had a (financially) strong lobby negotiating on their behalf. As a result, they were released from Germany after a relatively short period of six months in captivity, whereas the merchants from Gibraltar stayed in camp throughout the entire war despite their relentless efforts.

The Hansa Line lascars also appear in the Hamburg State Archive, however not in the holding of a government ministry but of a medical institution, the *Hafenarzt* (harbour physician). The unique institution was created in 1893 in reaction to the severe cholera epidemic that struck Hamburg in 1892 with the objective of a permanent sanitary control of the ships, crews and passengers entering Hamburg port from overseas. Besides the hygienic supervision of vessels and water, fighting (tropical) diseases in the harbour also fell under the scope of functions of the *Hafenarzt*. Therefore, in 1939, the medical treatment of the Hamburg *lascars*, lodged in narrow barges owned by the Hansa Line anchored in the port fell under this institution's field of responsibility. The doctor in charge in 1939, Dr. Kuckenburg, saw ill lascars during his office hours and transferred them to hospitals in Hamburg if their condition required it. Moreover, the barges were inspected at least once by public health authorities and were labelled absolutely inappropriate for

housing the South Asian seamen.¹⁷ Expecting the imminent transfer of the lascars to Bremen, the representative of the Hansa Line, Captain Oetker, was not as dedicated to the lascar's wellbeing as his counterparts in Bremen, who had rejected the idea of accommodating the lascars on ships on humanitarian grounds.

Whereas the Bremen files reveal the position of capital in correspondence with the state and police authorities, the Hamburg files look at the same group of people from the perspective of hygiene. Driven by the fear of an epidemic in the port area, the Hamburg health authorities and not the employers pressed for better living conditions for the captives. In Bremen, the employer's responsibility to care for a loyal workforce was the driving force behind the negotiation on the lascars' behalf. In combination with the material in the PAAA and the private papers of Captain H.W. Jones, a systematic analysis of the living conditions of South Asian seamen before the background of different protecting bodies, be it their employers, their superiors, inspectors of the health authorities or the Swiss Legation or the absence thereof is possible.

Conclusion

One of the main objectives of the MIDA Archival Reflexicon is to draw attention to smaller archives and private collections housed in German archives, which may offer new insights into the entangled histories as well as their accompanying entangled archives outside the realm of the colonial British archives. The numerically rather limited holdings on South Asian civil prisoners in German captivity spread out over multiple archives may seem insignificant when studied as isolated entities. However, when analysed with regard to their interrelated nature, their relevance for historiography becomes visible. As the holdings complement and corroborate each other, only the restructuring of the archival order along thematic lines reveals possible research avenues. With archives as diverse as the PAAA, the Hamburg and Bremen State Archive and the Imperial War Museum in London, and holdings ranging from private papers to the documents of the harbour physician, there unfolds an intersected puzzle of sources yet to be systematically engaged with.

New research perspectives, as I have outlined in this essay, include the humanitarian and social conditions of the camps as well as the every-day life of South Asian prisoners. Moreover, the influence of international diplomacy and lobbying on these conditions as well as on the internees' chances of liberation and repatriation can be scrutinized through these sources. Whether it was for personal sympathy and general humanitarian considerations, in the interest of capital or for the fear of a health crisis, outside intervention on the prisoners' behalf significantly improved their overall situation. However, no matter how strong the lobby, their experience in camp was generally unpleasant, if not traumatizing, and sometimes even deadly, as the material has also shown.

Another possible trajectory for historiography is a comparative study of the camps for South Asian civil prisoners during World War I, on which there already exists a fairly significant body of primary and secondary sources, and their counterparts in World War II. Possible vantage points are the implementation of German propaganda among the South

Asians, the conditions of their interment, modes of resistance to the camp regime as well as their own perspective on the war.

These suggestions are by no means exhaustive and can easily be expanded to other fields of research.

Endnotes

- 1 PAAA_R40967, p. 51.
- 2 PAAA_R40967, p. 40.
- 3 PAAA_R40967, p. 59.
- 4 PAAA_R40967, p. 81
- 5 StaHH, 352-7 I Hafenarzt I, Nr. 42 , Abschrift aus dem Bericht des Gesundhtsb. Maak vom 23. Sept.
- 6 StaB, 13/1-P.1.f.Nr. 35 (2981) Ausländerpolizeiliche Behandlung indischer Staatsangehöriger 1939-1940, p. 16.
- 7 StaB, 13/1-P.1.f.Nr. 35, p. 36.
- 8 StaHH, 352-7 I Hafenarzt I, Nr. 42, Handschriftliche Notiz.
- 9 StaB, 13/1-P.1.f.Nr. 35, p. 33.
- 10 See also the entry by Vandana Joshi which deals with the sources on Indian civilians and soldiers housed in ITS archive in Bad Arolsen.
- 11 14/10/1/1; 14/10/1/2, Private Papers of Captain H. W. Jones.
- 12 14/10/1/2; Private Papers of Captain H. W. Jones.
- 13 14/10/2, Private Papers of Captain H. W. Jones.
- 14 StaB, 4,13/1 - Senator für Inneres, Allgemeine Registratur (1940-1956).
- 15 StaB, 13/1-P.1.f.Nr. 35, p. 8-9.
- 16 StaB, 13/1-P.1.f.Nr. 35, p. 33-34.
- 17 StaHH, 352-7 I Hafenarzt I, Nr. 42, Abschrift aus dem Bericht des Gesundhtsb. Maak vom 23. Sept. 1939.

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