International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies (IJHSSS)
A Peer-Reviewed Bi-monthly Bi-lingual Research Journal
ISSN: 2349-6959 (Online), ISSN: 2349-6711 (Print)
Volume-XI, Issue-III, May2025, Page No.531-537
Published by Scholar Publications, Sribhumi, Assam, India, 788711
Website: http://www.ijhsss.com
DOI: 10.29032/ijhsss. v11.i3.049

Secrets and Surveillance: British Intelligence in Colonial India (1904–1924)

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Received: 30.04.2025; Accepted: 18.05.2025; Available online: 31.05.2025
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Abstract

This review critically examines Richard Popplewell's seminal work, Intelligence and Imperial Defence, which offers the first comprehensive analysis of British intelligence operations in colonial India between 1904 and 1924. Popplewell explores how the British transformed their intelligence framework in response to increasing Indian nationalist resistance and global geopolitical tensions. Divided into thirteen detailed chapters, the book traces the evolution of surveillance from the rudimentary Thuggee and Dakati Department to the formal establishment of the Department of Criminal Intelligence (DCI), and later its coordination with MI5 and MI6. The narrative spans major anti-colonial movements, such as the Swadeshi agitation, the activities of the Ghadar Party, the Indo-German Conspiracy, and the infiltration of revolutionary networks across Europe, North America, and East Asia. Popplewell highlights the challenges faced by colonial intelligence agencies in containing revolutionaries like Rash Behari Bose and Lala Hardayal, while also detailing how the British leveraged global alliances to suppress anti-imperialist propaganda and arms smuggling. Although the book is praised for connecting bureaucratic intelligence structures with broader imperial ambitions, it overlooks critical technical aspects such as the role of Room 40, the Cipher School, and GCHQ – issues later addressed by scholars like Nigel West and Ben Macintyre. Despite these omissions, Popplewell's work remains a foundational contribution to understanding how secrecy, surveillance, and imperial strategy were deeply intertwined. This review reaffirms the book's relevance to the fields of intelligence history, South Asian studies, and colonial governance.

Key Words: British Intelligence, Colonial India, Revolutionary Nationalism, Surveillance and Espionage, Imperial Defence

Prelude to a Surveillance State:

Anyone cannot approach information gathering and intelligence study in Indian empire as defined by historian Bernard. S. Cohn through his work especially Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge. Cohn's main argument was British colonial empire built upon surveillance, and information control as tools of domination. Popplewell's work much more similar with this framework. Comparably historian David Arnold's work "policing of empire" shows us how colonial power was strengthen through preventive surveillance and the administrative agitation. By connecting Popplewell's book to these larger historical ideas, we can better understand how intelligence was used by the British not just during

war, but as a regular tool to run the empire. This book is not only about spying—it also helps us see how the British used information and fear to stay in power.

Richard Popplewell, a military historian, first attempted to cover the British Indian Intelligence system systematically and thoroughly. Also, it is the first book in India, and its colonial parent, England, successfully defended the Indian empire against the insurgency during the first two decades of the twentieth century. "Colonial Intelligence and the Imperial Defence of India" offers a detailed exploration of British intelligence operations in colonial India, especially during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The book sheds light on how surveillance, espionage, and military intelligence were intricately tied to the broader goals of imperial control and frontier defences. This meticulous account spans 13 chapters that explore the development and operations of British intelligence and its impact on the colonial administration in India. What sets Popplewell's work apart is his ability to shift the reader's focus from battles and diplomacy to the hidden machinery of the empire—intelligence—and how this secretive arm of governance was instrumental in preserving British authority over a politically volatile and increasingly rebellious colony.

Spies, Reforms, and Empire: The Evolution:

Popplewell elaborated on the nineteenth century's British intelligence system. He shows that early British administrators never really felt the need for Intelligence. Their imperial demands were solely based on military power. But after the 1857 mutiny, they realised this could not go on for the long run. Initially, from 1772 to 1830, the British had no particular organisation for surveillance. Local unemployed, pauper guys are individually recruited for particular information. In this method, the British often receive 'botched up' information. Simultaneously, the gradual collapse of the Mughal Empire resulted in a massive breakdown of law and order in large areas of central and northern India. In this anarchy, the biggest problem was the rise and growth of the 'Thuggee'. They were religiously inspired banditry. The massive attacks of thuggees made civilians' lives miserable. The Thugs murdered and then robbed their victims in honour of the Hindu Goddess Kali. The British realised that if they suppressed them and made them work for the Britishers, then it could be mutually beneficial. In the reign of Bentick, 1830, Britishers endeavoured 'Thuggee and Dakati' Department. This ad hoc recruitment system helped the British to gather information locally, but still, they could not anticipate the 1857 mutiny. The gradual increase of Indian resistance made the British so insecure that they felt the importance of a robust intelligence system. Then viceroy Lord Curzon came to India with a determination to reform the British defence system. He correctly measured the "Thuggee and Dakati" department's incapability. Lord Kitchener, then the Commander-in-Chief, advised Curzon to build a formal and efficient intelligence agency that could help the British army. In this regard, they abolished the "Thuggee and Dakati" Dept and established the Department of Criminal Intelligence (1904). However, the newly formed DCI did not have the autonomy to make decisions because they were controlled by the Home and Civil Affairs department. The potential German and Russian threat forced the British to amalgamate the DCI's action with the CID's. The intention of creating DCI was initially to do Police Intelligence work, but after a short DCI started working for the troops. As Curzon implemented the Swadeshi Partition in 1905, the whole country started protesting. Popplewell argues that the government aimed to 'dethrone' Bengal for the crush of political consciousness. DCI expanded its responsibility to suppress revolutionary

activities that were initiated from Bengal. The 'Bhadralok' culture became violent when the anti-partition campaign started. The agitation was so profound that the British king George V abolished the partition and transferred the capital from Calcutta to Delhi. This approach undoubtedly worked for the British to calm violence, but the new capital became the target of 'terrorists. One measure that the Britishers adopted between 1904-1914 introduced an extension of domestic intelligence inside the Indian subcontinent. The organisation, like Abhinav Bharat or Anushilan Samiti's members, began with the intention to kill the British informers and destroy their act of witness. Also, the attempt to blow up the train of Lord Hardinge in 1912 made DCI members intensified. They instructed the police to arrest some revolutionaries and keep them in detention, but the main 'villain', Rash Bihari Bose, fled abroad. In the meantime, DCI weekly reports informed abroad that many revolutionaries formed their organisation to start the armed rebellion. DCI collaborated with the newly made MI6 to stop spreading 'Propaganda Material'- Liberty Leaflets, newspapers, and typesetters against Britishers colonial power. James Campbell Kerr, David Petrie, and Charles Cleveland asked the government to expand the intelligence activities abroad. Eventually, the war started and the revolutionary movement infiltrated within a bigger chaos.

Tracking Indian Revolutionaries Across Continents During the Pre-War Decade:

Popplewell identifies Bengal as a complex region for revolutionary and counter-intelligence efforts. The partition of Bengal became the key point for revolutionary activities. The Anushilan Samiti (1902), Yugantar Samiti (1906) was the sources where members used to train and get prepared for actions. Instances of Khudiram Bose, Prafulla Chaki's bomb case, and Aravinda Ghosh's arrest for the Alipore bomb case made the DCI struggle to make decisions because of their limited resources. Bengal People mentioned by Popplewell are 'Bhadralok', as they are educated by the Western system of education. The 'Bhadralok' clearly felt the social domination that was imposed by the British. The DCI mostly lacks due to their scarcity of associates. The local police were unorganised and unprepared for their duty of surveillance. Sir Bampfylde Fuller, the first Lieutenant Governor of Eastern Bengal and Assam advised by the DCI that he took the responsibility of crushing the Swadeshi rebellion. He arrested Surendranath Banerjee, the most prominent leader of the Swadeshi revolution. Also, he arrested Aurobindo Ghosh and eventually started the 'Alipore Bomb Case'. Godfrey Denham, the assistant superintendent of police (Special Branch), got tipped off by DCI about the location of Pulin Bihari Das and other Anushilan Samity members. Police raided the Maniktala and found a huge load of arms and ammunition. The case 'Maniktala Bomb Case started swiftly, and Bengal became a hotspot of 'terrorist' activities. The incident is described as 1st July 1909, London, a young revolutionary, Madan-Lal-Dhingra, assassinated the former Civil Servant Curzon Wylie. This breaks a massive political violence not only in England but also in Europe. London became the hub of the escaped 'anarchists' and 'revolutionaries. Shyamji Krishna Varma established India House in 1908 in London. India House, especially a hostel for Indian students, where they got shelter, training and information for 'Mission'. Between 1905-1909, DCI asked Scotland Yard several times to keep surveillance on Indian escaped revolutionaries. But their manpower, especially for surveillance, was limited. The revolutionaries got impossibly traced out when they moved to another state or country in Europe. The establishment of MI5 and MI6 in 1909 gave an edge to the British defence

system. DCI sent their weekly reports to MI6 for procedure. The MI6 agents were bound to watch regularly and inform the whereabouts of revolutionary persons to headquarters. DCI got so stressed to find out about them, and eventually they collaborated with MI5. The Double agent system began, and many informers started working for two agencies, MI6 and DCI. The second prominent place where revolutionaries escaped and planned their actions against the British Indian Empire was North America and Canada. There were numerous Punjab restaurants where many revolutionaries worked and met for their planning for action. The Sikh revolutionaries, including Lala Hardayal, Sohan Singh Bhakna, Kartar Singh, Barkhatulla, along with Tarak-Nath Das, the Bengali revolutionary, formed the 'Ghadar Party' in 1913. Their main focus was getting support from other anti-British countries and initiating an armed movement towards British India. Also, from the Vancouver Immigration Dept, an officer, William Hopkinson, wrote a report in late 1907 that there were lots of Indian immigrants trespassing the U.S.A. and Canada border and staying there as transient citizens. DCI got puzzled, and a few DCI's higher-ranking officials employed their own agent codename 'C' to trace them. Also, DCI proposed to the Vancouver immigrant office to enhance the security system on the Pacific coast. Lala Hardyal also started a newspaper named 'Ghadar' to spread anti-imperialist views among Indian 'Natives'. The Komagata-Maru in 1914 was one of the most devastating moments in History. Due to early information from Canadian authorities, the ship could not land in Canada and was returned, and British Police shot them. This incident caused grief among revolutionaries.

Indian Revolutionaries and the British Spy Network During the World Conflict:

The outbreak of World War I created massive violence for the Indian revolutionary fraternity. They seek this opportunity where the British want to entrench their empire. Popplewell discusses that there was a significant expansion of Intelligence counter-intelligence activities. The British government anticipated that the revolutionaries might take this war opportunity to attack the British Indian Empire. That is why the government proclaimed the 1915 India Defence Act, which allows a suspicious person to be arrested without any warrants or permission. There are several rumours that a ship called S.S. Moraitis ought to launch from Germany to Mexico with eleven thousand Mauser pistols with a significant amount of ammunition. This made the DCI administrator intensify, and they desperately wanted to sink that ship. Under McInnes's supervision, around 38 ships were fuelled to carry torpedo charges and destroy the endeavour of revolutionaries. There was also several information that Lala Hardyal and some associates could attempt an armed invasion. Another thing Popplewell especially argued was that the British got desperate to spoil the Indo-German Conspiracy, which was supposed to destabilise British rule in India. Despite the effort, Popplewell notes that several intelligence failures occurred along with the inability to recognise revolutionaries' activities. Popplewell argued that the revolutionary epicentre, Bengal and its revolutionaries exploited the chaos of World War I. There are several bomb making operations and political assassinations attempted over Bengal. But DCI and Calcutta CID's joint intelligence survey and their several agents' round-up efforts secured the British rule mobilisation. Another scene we got to see was when police got tipped off by DCI and raided a Calcutta arms dealer, Rodd & Co., they seized 50 Mauser pistols and 4600 rounds of ammunition. Also, revolutionaries from the USA sent large numbers of explosives to Bengal's terrorists to continue armed rebellion.

So, Popplewell is sceptical that the nascent stage of Indian Intelligence failed to eliminate the revolutionary threat in Bengal. The WWI time frame, DCI simultaneously focused on Europe along India. The Indian revolutionaries collaborated with their associates, German and Irish nationalists. British agents of Superintendent John Wallinger inform that some Indian 'natives' and other Europeans handle and deal with arms and ammunition. Superintended John Wallinger tried to gather information about their activities and disrupt those alliances through infiltration. Another incident Popplewell mentioned is that Madam Cama came to India and spread anti-British propaganda by printing seditious newspapers and distributing Swadeshi Pamphlets. The Irish rebellion saw a new phase in the 1916 Easter Rising campaign. This action motivated Indian revolutionaries to take up armed revolution. The global dimension of intelligence on Indian agitators we get to see from this chapter. The North American with the Canadian aspect, we get to see this chapter. The Ghadar Party's intense activities need to be dismantled for the protection of British Imperial interests. Here, British agents, narrated by David Petrie, are associated with U.S and Canadian authorities to track arms and ammunition shipments through battleships. Several rumours are circulating that lots of land mines were going to be shipped to Ireland to revolutionaries in exchange for explosives and arms. British authorities not only in battleground but also by ship and submarine, they made strict surveillance during wartime. The 'Special Network Combat Force' was built for the execution of the 'Special Sabotage Plan'. According to the Canadian Immigrant office's record, Popplewell informs us that only on the Pacific Coast between October 1915 to March 1916, about 11 ships transported arms sabotaged by the Naval Force with a torpedo charge. The challenging, hostile war environment made their work cycle vicious. The irony is that Popplewell described wartime intelligence not only in India, Europe and America but also covered up the Far East zone. The Far East zone became another critical scene of British Intelligence operations. The most perilous zone was Japan. Japanese agents become easy targets for British agents due to their unique caricature. The Indian revolutionary escaped from British captivity and reached the periphery of Japan, China and other south-east Asia. They sought support and became immigrants temporarily. British agents faced unique challenges there, like linguistic barriers and geopolitical complexities. In WWI, these areas became a 'safe-passage' for Indian revolutionaries. They follow the Silk Route and eventually enter India through Burma. The diversified cultural and Political environment often made British agents work often challenging conditions.

British Intelligence across Continents in the Post–First World War Era:

The post-WWI scenario explored by Popplewell was a bit clumsy but informative. The chapter evolved over the after 5 years in the Indian subcontinent. There was a shift in British intelligence policies. Popplewell shows that the eventual rise of Gandhi changed the political phenomena. Gandhi's first non-violent mass movement, 'Non-Cooperation', made British agents' jobs tougher than before. The covert operations of violent revolutionaries often hide their faces under non-violent attributes. Another major threat was more concern after 1917, the infiltration of communist propaganda into Indian politics. The Indian revolutionaries got a new hype for their revolutionary trajectories. The Bolshevik menace was so profound in the Indo-Afghan province that the British agreed to Afghanistan's autonomy in 1919. There were several communist universities and schools established in Moscow and the surrounding areas. The revolutionaries like Muzaffer Ahmed, S.A. Dange

were trained by Marxist education and spread propaganda among Indian citizens through newspapers and pamphlets. Popplewell highlights the challenges faced in monitoring the organised revolutionaries more than ever before. The North America and the Far East are discussed after the war. Though this material may initially appear unrelated, it complements the overarching framework of the study, the changing circumstances and Post-War politics forced Indian revolutionaries to adapt new trajectories for their actions. The easy choice for them to continue their path- Communism. They were infiltrated with several communist members and continued spreading anti-British propaganda. Popplewell concluded the book with how the British administrator leveraged diplomatic relations to counter these new threats.

Historical Insights into British Intelligence Practices:

According to Popplewell, British intelligence efforts during the period 1904–1924 played a pivotal role in maintaining imperial control in a more organised manner and shielding the empire from wartime threats and global conflict. Although he acknowledges that the formal establishment of intelligence services in 1904 was neither perfect nor resource-rich, he argues that it nonetheless significantly contributed to the British defence system. From a global perspective, these efforts proved crucial in effectively suppressing the Indian revolutionary movement. However, Popplewell's work lacks technical depth in certain areas. For instance, he does not delve into the findings and operations of the Cypher School, as Nigel West does. Key aspects such as the role of 'Room 40' and GCHQ in monitoring Indian revolutionaries are largely overlooked. Similarly, the covert missions of the 'Secret Air Service', which are well documented in Ben Macintyre's work, are absent from his analysis. Despite these omissions, what makes Popplewell's contribution noteworthy is his ability to connect the bureaucratic intelligence framework with broader imperial ambitions. His analysis encourages readers to reconsider how surveillance, secrecy, and geopolitics were fundamental to the foundations of colonial rule.

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