

# 1 The Singapore Mutiny of 1915

## Global Origins in a Global War

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On February 15, 1915, the right wing of the Indian Army's 5th Light Infantry mutinied on the island of Singapore. Although this mutiny did not affect most of the rest of the world, the rest of the world very definitely affected it. This book includes two chapters on the mutiny of the 5th because it encapsulates so clearly the ways World War I came to Southeast Asia. Indeed, two of its primary causes – German–Indian–Turkish anti-Allied propaganda and pro-German activists – played critical roles in the whole region for the duration of the war. Concern about pro-German, anticolonial schemes dominate the British, French, and Dutch official diplomatic and military archives from this period, and include an almost paranoid apprehension about the revolutionary potential for such schemes across Southeast and East Asia. For while activities intended to undermine colonial rule were never as successful, organized, or well-funded as colonial authorities imagined or feared, they nevertheless contributed to anticolonial unrest in many places during the war, including Malaya, the East Indies, and Indochina. Such anticolonial activity was doubly threatening because its networks of support went well beyond the orbit of colonial control, including places as close as Siam and China, and as distant as the Ottoman Empire, the United States, and Germany. And these networks did not respect colonial boundaries: Pan-Islamic, pro-German propaganda moved easily between the East Indies and Malaya, while pro-German activities originating in China were directed to Indochina, Malaya, Burma, and India. In this sense, the mutiny is also significant because it allows us to see the porousness of colonial and state territorial boundaries throughout the region, as well as the many avenues of connection between Southeast Asia and the rest of the world.

As a case study, the mutiny of the 5th in Singapore also illustrates the ways global, anticolonial forces generated during the war were mediated by colonized subjects. In order to win people over, anti-Allied propaganda and pro-German activists not only had to target issues that spoke to actual grievances of colonized subjects, but they also had to convince people

that acting against colonial rule was worth the risk. The latter was far more difficult than the former, and is doubtless one of the reasons such efforts were not particularly successful over the course of the war. But in this case, the grievances of the 5th and the encouragement by pro-German, pan-Islamic print and people were sufficiently aligned that they produced a mutiny. Fortunately for us, its rich documentary base allows us to glimpse the motivations of the sepoys themselves in taking such a huge risk. In so doing, we can see the influence of wartime global forces on individual actions, even when those individual actions did not affect the course of world history.

It wasn't just the causes of the mutiny that capture the ways the World War I came to Southeast Asia – so too did the reasons for its defeat. Here too, wartime alliances and rivalries fundamentally shaped the outcome of the mutiny, even as they highlighted in microcosm shifting dynamics among the various powers in the region. This, however, is the subject of Chapter 2. In this chapter, we begin with the events of the mutiny in order to establish a baseline for “what happened” on February 15 and the days that followed. From there, we explore the causes of the mutiny, beginning with the initial disaffection of the Malay States Guides (who were also stationed on Singapore) and then moving to the German–Indian–Turkish plot and the role of German prisoners of war. We end by contrasting the available evidence on the causes of the mutiny with the public explanation in an attempt to understand why British authorities fought so hard to minimize the global context in which the mutiny had occurred. Throughout, the testimony and letters of sepoys themselves feature largely, both to demonstrate the impact of global forces on individual lives and also to remind us that they were more than mere pawns in a great game between European powers. In early 1915, the sepoys of the 5th were confronted with information about the war from sources that literally crisscrossed the world. They assessed the credibility of the information as best they could, explored their options, and then took action. While the mutiny occurred locally, the evidence indicates that sepoys in the 5th considered their place in the wider global context of anticolonial activity before making their choice to take local action.

### **Mutiny of the “Loyal 5th”<sup>1</sup>**

Monday, February 15 was a holiday in Singapore in 1915. It was Chinese New Year, and since two-thirds of Singapore's population was

<sup>1</sup> The 5th Light Infantry were known as the “Loyal 5th” because of their role in helping to suppress the 1857 Indian Rebellion.

Chinese, the island city marked the occasion publicly as a day of celebration and rest. By early afternoon, many men of the Indian Army’s 5th Light Infantry – which was completing a five-month garrison duty – were involved in various light activities, including praying, napping, smoking, taking care of regimental animals, and chatting. The regiment’s British officers were engaged in idle pursuits nearby: The commanding officer, Colonel Martin, was sleeping at his house, several other officers were resting in their quarters, and one was returning from a picnic. Two weeks earlier, the regiment had received orders to transfer to Hong Kong, and most of the men’s belongings were already packed. They were to embark the next day, and only the final preparations for departure remained.

One of these preparations was to transfer small arms ammunition from the regimental magazine to a truck destined for the Army Ordnance Department. A small group of sepoys was ordered to complete this work, and they began just after 2:00 p.m. At about 3:00 p.m., someone – it was never clear exactly who – fired a shot in the direction of the truck, and immediately afterward the outside sentry guarding the transfer charged the men around the truck with fixed bayonet.<sup>2</sup> According to eyewitnesses, all but one of the sepoys who had been loading the ammunition scattered, and then both A and B companies of the regiment’s right wing turned out and looted the ammunition in the truck and the magazine.<sup>3</sup>

From all accounts, both Indian and British, confusion reigned for the next few minutes. Many sepoys later testified they did not pay much attention to the opening shots, thinking they were fireworks being lit in honor of Chinese New Year. But as the companies that mutinied began to move out and challenge bystanders to join or be shot, the gravity of the situation became clear. Within fifteen minutes an Indian officer, Subedar Khan Mohamed Khan, had reached Colonel Martin’s house to alert him. Since Martin was sleeping, it took some time for him to telephone the city to let the newly arrived General Officer Commanding the Troops in Singapore – Brigadier General Dudley Ridout – know what was happening. In the confusion, Martin neglected to inform the officers

<sup>2</sup> Narrative of Events, Confidential Report from Governor Arthur Young to Lewis Harcourt, February 25, 1915, Report on Singapore Disturbances of 1915, WO 32/9559, TNA. Imtiaz Ali was credited for firing the first shot later, but this is not entirely clear.

<sup>3</sup> The half of the regiment that mutinied was the right wing, which the official report listed as being composed mainly of “Rajput Muslims.” T.R. Sareen, compiler. *Secret Documents on Singapore Mutiny 1915, Vol. I* (New Delhi: Mouto Publishing House, 1995), 37. Both volumes I and II are published versions of the Court of Inquiry held in the aftermath of the mutiny, along with its supporting evidence, a few memoirs, and some newspaper articles.

at Tanglin barracks, which was serving as a POW camp, or the municipal police in Singapore.<sup>4</sup>

In the meantime, the mutinous A and B companies of the right wing were joined by C and D companies, and they split into three groups. The first headed straight for the POW camp at Tanglin – where the officers and men of the German ship *Emden*, which had been sunk off the coast of Malaya, were being held along with other German nationals – and released the prisoners. In the process, they killed thirteen British and Indian officers and men and, apparently accidentally, one German prisoner.<sup>5</sup> A second, smaller group headed toward the center of Singapore, killing a Malay civilian and six British soldiers and civilians along the way. Once they reached the city center, they also wounded two police officers at the Central Police Station.<sup>6</sup> A third group proceeded to the barracks of the Malay States Guides artillery unit, where they attempted – with some success – to convince the soldiers there to join them.<sup>7</sup> At various points along the way, this third group killed nine British civilians – nine men and one woman – and one British officer.<sup>8</sup> This group also attempted to storm Colonel Martin's house but, after being beaten back, besieged it instead. It is worth noting that very few sepoy actively tried to defend against the mutinous right wing. A small group of Malay States Volunteer Rifles, who were in Singapore for a training course, stayed with Colonel Martin and helped defend his house, but the majority of the 818 men in the regiment either turned against the British or disappeared into the surrounding jungle.<sup>9</sup>

By late afternoon, news of the mutiny had spread to much of the island and well beyond. Brigadier General Ridout telephoned the Admiral Commanding-in-Chief, Martyn Jerram, to request authorization to land a party of eighty-five British seamen on the *HMS Cadmus*, which

<sup>4</sup> Ridout to Secretary of State for War, February 25, Report on Singapore Disturbances of 1915, WO 32/9559.

<sup>5</sup> Report on Singapore Disturbances of 1915, 22. <sup>6</sup> Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 31.

<sup>7</sup> There is some confusion on this point. While Tarling and Harper argue that the 5th tried to force arms on the Malay States Guides, the papers included in the Memorandums and Telegrams Relating to Disturbances at Singapore, 1915, CO 273/420 indicate that about half of the ninety-six men of the unit joined with the 5th. See also Nicholas Tarling, "The Merest Pustule: The Singapore Mutiny of 1915," *The Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 55 (1982); Tim Harper, "Singapore, 1915, and the Birth of the Asian Underground," *Modern Asian Studies* 47, no. 06 (2013).

<sup>8</sup> Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 30–31.

<sup>9</sup> Report 13548, March 23, 1915. Memorandums and Telegrams Relating to Disturbances at Singapore, CO 273/420, TNA. Sho Kuwajima makes this point about the behavior of the left, nonmutinous, wing of the regiment in "Indian Mutiny in Singapore, 1915: People Who Observed the Scene and People Who Heard the News," *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 11:1 (June 2009), 376.

was in Singapore harbor.<sup>10</sup> He then called out the Singapore Volunteer Corps (SVC), which was a civilian force composed, in August 1914, of about 450 Malay and Chinese men. He also called out the Singapore Volunteer Rifles, a partially trained European infantry corps formed at the start of the war, and appointed about 200 special constables from among the European population.<sup>11</sup> Ridout proceeded to close all roads in and out of the city of Singapore in an effort to prevent mutinous sepoys from reaching the city center in force. Then, at dusk, he asked the Governor – Arthur Young – to declare martial law. Meanwhile, Ridout and Young sent small groups of volunteers and special constables to the European households in the surrounding area, and brought their members to the city center for protection. As many European women and children as possible were put out of harm’s way on three ships in the harbor, while the men of the city – including 186 Japanese – were assembled to guard key buildings.<sup>12</sup>

The European population of Singapore had reason to be alarmed by the mutiny. The British regiment that had been stationed in Singapore before the war – the King’s Own Yorkshire Light Infantry – had been recalled back to Europe at its start. As we have seen, the volunteer forces on the island were few in number and poorly trained. Singapore maintained a civil police force of about 1,200 Malays, Chinese, and Indians, but only 220 Sikhs among them were trained to use arms.<sup>13</sup> This meant that in February 1915, the 5th Light Infantry and the small detachment of the Malay States Guides were the only regular forces garrisoned for the defense of Singapore, and they were far better trained and armed than any of the auxiliary or civil forces. And now, in the middle of a world war, portions of both were in open rebellion and the rest were in hiding, leaving the colony almost completely undefended. To make matters more desperate, the rebel sepoys had made it clear that they were not afraid to

<sup>10</sup> The Admiral C-I-C China was in Singapore at the time. Ridout to Secretary of State for War, February 25, Report on Singapore Disturbances of 1915.

<sup>11</sup> Tim Harper, “Singapore, 1915, and the Birth of the Asian Underground,” 1783.

<sup>12</sup> For more on the evacuation of women, see C. Doran, “Gender Matters in the Singapore Mutiny,” *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 17:1 (April 2002), 76–93. The elaborate protection of women and children from mutinous troops was reminiscent of the 1857 Indian Rebellion, when images of raped and murdered British women and children fueled British desires for revenge. See Heather Streets, *Martial Races: The Military, Race, and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), chapters 1 and 2. Not surprisingly, the local government did not evacuate Chinese, Malay, or Indian women. For the Japanese volunteers, see Sho Kuwajima, *Mutiny in Singapore: War, Anti-War, and the War for India’s Independence* (New Delhi: Rainbow Publishers, 2006), 96.

<sup>13</sup> W.R.E. Harper and Harry Miller, *Singapore Mutiny* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1984), 16.

kill the objects of their wrath, having taken thirty-one lives already in the first hours of the mutiny.

For these reasons, British authorities realized immediately that reinforcements from outside Singapore were necessary. Within hours after the start of the mutiny, Governor Young had telegraphed India to ask for a British regiment to be sent straight away. Realizing these reinforcements would take days to arrive, on the evening of the 15th Young also asked General Ridout to request that Admiral Jerram send a wireless message for help to a French cruiser, the *Montcalm*, which had just left Singapore harbor the previous day. Later in the evening, Young saw Admiral Jerram himself and asked him to try reaching one or two Japanese cruisers and any other friendly ships that might be of assistance. As a result of these efforts, help began to arrive from the waters around Singapore by the 16th. The French arrived first in the *Montcalm*, then the Japanese and Russian cruisers *Otowa* and *Orel* arrived on the 18th, and finally the Japanese cruiser *Tsushima* arrived on the 19th. By February 20, the 4th Shropshires, who had been sent from Burma by the Indian government, also arrived.<sup>14</sup>

In the interval, however, the mutiny had begun to fall apart. On the morning of the 16th, the eighty-five men of the British ship *Cadmus*, along with sixty Volunteers, raised the siege at Colonel Martin's house and retrieved the inhabitants.<sup>15</sup> Already on the 16th many men from the nonmutinous left wing left their hiding places in the jungle and surrendered to British authorities in small groups, and by the 17th, 300 of the approximately 400 of these men were in custody.<sup>16</sup> From that point on the British and their allies were on the offensive, capturing fugitives, retaking occupied areas, and receiving sepoys who decided to surrender. By February 24, all but 150 of the 818 men of the 5th Light Infantry and three of the ninety-six Malay States Guides were in custody.<sup>17</sup> The situation was so well in hand that the French *Montcalm* had departed the day before, and in the following few days so too did the Japanese and Russian ships.

The British authorities began meting out punishment for the mutiny almost immediately. On February 23, two sepoys were convicted by

<sup>14</sup> Report 8578, February 22, 1915. Memorandums and Telegrams Relating to Disturbances at Singapore.

<sup>15</sup> Report on Singapore Disturbances of 1915. They did not hold the house, but rather withdrew because their numbers were considered too small to hold it effectively.

<sup>16</sup> Report 13548, March 23, 1915. Memorandums and Telegrams Relating to Disturbances at Singapore.

<sup>17</sup> Report 14734, February 29, Memorandums and Telegrams Relating to Disturbances at Singapore.

summary court-martial and shot. But this was just the beginning. In all, 203 sepoy in the 5th Light Infantry were court-martialed, and 202 were convicted. Sentences included forty-one executions, sixty-three transportations for life, sixty-nine prison terms between ten and twenty years, and twenty-four prison terms between six weeks and seven years. A further fifty-two sepoys died in the fighting or in trying to escape Singapore, bringing the total death toll – soldier and civilian – to a grisly 124.<sup>18</sup> Nearly a quarter of the regiment had been killed or permanently removed.

The harsh response to the mutiny was meant to instill fear among both the armed forces and the civilian population, and executions were made public for this reason. The most dramatic episode occurred on March 22, 1915, when twenty-one of the principal instigators from the 5th were sentenced. A crowd of approximately 6,000 civilians turned up to watch. All twenty-one men had been court-martialed and found guilty: Sixteen were sentenced to transportation or imprisonment, while five were sentenced to summary execution by firing squad. The five condemned men – Subedar Dunde Khan, Jemadar Chisti Khan, Havildar Rahmat Ali, Sepoy Hakim Ali, and Havildar Abdul Ghani – were then marched, under heavy guard, to posts in front of the prison wall. Their feet and hands were tied together while the presiding Major loudly proclaimed that all of the men “have been found guilty of stirring up and joining a mutiny and are sentenced to death by being shot to death,” and that “all these men of the Indian Army have broken their oath as soldiers of His Majesty the King.”<sup>19</sup> For the benefit of the crowd assembled, the sentences were read in English, Malay, Chinese, and Urdu. Then, the firing squad of twenty-five men raised their rifles and fired multiple times while the crowd of civilians looked on. Executions continued to occur until April 18, although courts-martial continued to be held until September 1915 as the last remaining soldiers were brought in from their hiding places on the island.<sup>20</sup>

By all accounts, the mutiny was a failure. After liberating the German POW camp and causing panic on the island, the mutineers were unable to occupy the city, hold the military barracks, induce large numbers of other military or civilian groups to join them, or escape the island to freedom. Those who did make it across the narrow strait to Johore were

<sup>18</sup> Court Martial Proceedings on Mutineers of 5th Light Infantry, Singapore, 1915, L/Mil/7/7191; Report 8952, February 23, Memorandums and Telegrams Relating to Disturbances at Singapore. The death toll includes those killed by the mutineers as well.

<sup>19</sup> *The Straits Times*, March 23, 1915.

<sup>20</sup> Court Martial Proceedings on Mutineers of the 5th Light Infantry, 1915. India Office Records, (IOR) L/MII/7/7191, Vol. II, 1.

sent back by its sultan, and several were believed to have drowned trying. In fact, almost every last sepoy who mutinied – and some who didn't – was either apprehended and punished, or died in the melee. Although the 5th had the element of surprise and military superiority, with outside help they were defeated in a matter of a few days.

For all its drama, the mutiny did not affect the course of the global war. Fighting continued in Europe, in the Dardanelles, and on the seas. Singapore remained in British hands, and no further violence erupted on the island for the war's duration. As we shall see, authorities in Singapore did their best to cast the event as a purely local phenomenon with little relevance to the rest of the world, and over the decades the event faded into relative obscurity. For these reasons, until recently the Singapore Mutiny has not attracted much scholarly attention. Only two monographs have been devoted to the event: One was written in 1984 for a popular audience, while the other was written in 1991 with an eye toward the Japanese role in the affair.<sup>21</sup> The mutiny has also been the subject of six scholarly articles. The first, written by Nicholas Tarling in 1982, discounts the role of external influences on the mutiny.<sup>22</sup> Three others explore particular aspects of the mutiny, including the role played by Russians in its suppression, the use of gender as a trope by Europeans, and the use of racial profiling by British authorities in its aftermath.<sup>23</sup> Three explore the mutiny in its global context. The first, written by Sho Kuwajima in 2009, explores this theme only superficially.<sup>24</sup> The final two appeared in print simultaneously in 2013 and explore the mutiny in terms of global radicalism and as a way of exploring the relations of the local and the global, respectively.<sup>25</sup> A few scholars have discussed the mutiny as part of the larger Indian nationalist movement or in terms of the development of British intelligence in Southeast Asia, but when it is

<sup>21</sup> These books are, respectively, R.W.E. Harper and Harry Miller's *Singapore Mutiny* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), and Sho Kuwajima's *Indian Mutiny in Singapore* (New Delhi: Rainbow Publishers, 2006).

<sup>22</sup> Nicholas Tarling, "'The Merest Pustule': The Singapore Mutiny of 1915," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 55:2 (1982).

<sup>23</sup> Karen Snow, "Russia and the 1915 Mutiny in Singapore," *South East Asia Research* 5 (1997); and Christine Doran, "Gender Matters in the Singapore Mutiny"; Farish Noor, "Racial Profiling Revisited: The 1915 Indian Mutiny in Singapore and the Impact of Profiling on Religious and Ethnic Minorities," *Politics, Religion, and Ideology* 12:1 (2011).

<sup>24</sup> Sho Kuwajima, "Indian Mutiny in Singapore, 1915".

<sup>25</sup> Tim Harper, "Singapore, 1915, and the Birth of the Asian Underground," *Modern Asian Studies* 47:6 (2013); Heather Streets-Salter, "The Singapore Mutiny of 1915: The Local Was Global," *Journal of World History* 24:3 (2013). The arguments in my own article preview, in much abbreviated form, some of the arguments I make in this chapter and Chapter 2.



mentioned at all it has most commonly been framed in the context of Singaporean national history.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the mutiny’s apparent failure, it is an important case study for what it reveals about the ways larger global forces set in motion by the war affected Southeast Asia. The reason it provides such a rich case study is because it was documented extensively in multiple archives. The official British Court of Inquiry appointed to explore the causes of the mutiny compiled hundreds of pages of testimony from British, Indian, Chinese, and Malay witnesses. The sources also include courts-martial testimony, telegrams, reports, and eyewitness accounts.<sup>27</sup> The British sources are further bolstered by French sources compiled by the Admiral who commanded the *Montcalm* and the Governor of Indochina, by Dutch, Japanese and Russian sources, and by oral interviews of Singaporeans.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> For example, Bhai Nahal Singh and Kirpal Singh mention the mutiny on pages 174–175 of their *Struggle for Free Hindustan: Ghadar Movement, Vol. I (1905–1916)* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 1986), and Sho Kuwajima (*Mutiny in Singapore*) clearly sees the event as a part of an Indian nationalist history. Malcolm Murfett also devotes a chapter to the mutiny in his nationally based *Between Two Oceans: A Military History of Singapore From First Settlement to Final British Withdrawal* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2004), while Ban Kah Choon discusses it in terms of the development of the British Special Branch in *Absent History: the Untold Story of Special Branch Operations in Singapore, 1915–1942* (Singapore: Horizon Books, 2001). The Singapore National Museum’s permanent exhibit about the history of Singapore decidedly portrays the mutiny as a local event whose importance lies mostly in the development of the Singaporean nation.

<sup>27</sup> The British sources exist at both the National Archives (Report on Singapore Disturbances of 1915, WO 32/9559; Report on Singapore Disturbances Part Two, WO 32/9560; Memorandums and Telegrams Related to Disturbances at Singapore, CO 273/420) and at the India Office Library (Report in Connection with Mutiny of 5th Light Infantry at Singapore 1915, L/MIL/17/19/48, and Court Martial Proceedings on Mutineers of the 5th Light Infantry, 1915. India Office Records, L/MII/7/7191, Vols. I and II). The Foreign Office papers of the Straits Settlements at The National Archives also contain voluminous reports and letters about the Mutiny, and about sedition in the Indian Army more generally. Many of these documents – especially those held by the India Office collection in the British Library, have also been helpfully reproduced in Sareen’s *Secret Documents on the Singapore Mutiny*.

<sup>28</sup> French sources are located at the Archives Nationales d’Outre-Mer in Aix-en-Provence (Troubles de Singapore, FM indo/nf/1037). The Dutch sources are located at the Nationaal Archief at the Hague, mainly in the Ministerie van Kolonien: Geheim series but also in the Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken series. The Japanese sources have been used extensively by Sho Kuwajima in his *Mutiny in Singapore: War, Anti-War, and the War for India’s Independence* (New Delhi: Rainbow Publishers, 2006), and the Russian sources by Karen Snow in her “Russia in the 1915 Mutiny in Singapore.” The Singapore National Archives also maintains recordings (and transcriptions) of oral interviews, compiled mostly in the 1980s, of old Singapore residents who remembered the mutiny from their childhoods. However, these are mostly useful as a way of understanding how the mutiny has been remembered in Singapore rather than for their factual accuracy. Among the interviewees were Mabel Martin, William Martinus, Mohammad Javad Namazie, and Sng Choon Yee (SNA accession numbers 000388; 000446/09/07–08; 000189/11; and 000064/48/11–12, respectively).

Finally, the mutiny was well covered in newspaper articles from Japan, Hong Kong, Manila, and New York. While all of these sources must be used carefully when trying to reconstruct the voices of those who took part, they nevertheless allow unusual access, from a variety of international perspectives, to an event that brought the world – and the war – to Southeast Asia.

### Causes

Why did the 5th mutiny? Certainly every soldier in the regiment understood that the price for mutiny, if unsuccessful, was death. In fact the regiment's history was steeped in defending the Raj against mutiny, as it had remained loyal during the Indian Rebellion of 1857 fifty-five years earlier.<sup>29</sup> When the 5th arrived in Singapore in October 1914 from India's Central Provinces, it came with a good record of service and was serving its first overseas duty in the regiment's history. And yet less than four months after arriving in Singapore, half the men had mutinied and the 5th would never be trusted again. In the circumstances, it seems logical to surmise that whatever had induced the men of the 5th to mutiny occurred during their time in Singapore.

Based on the available evidence, the disaffection that led to the mutiny seems to have come from three main influences: the earlier disaffection of the Malay States Guides, the impact of German–Indian–Turkish plans to undermine Allied rule, and encouragement by German prisoners of war. These three elements were in fact deeply intertwined, as the Malay States Guides were themselves influenced by the other two. Thus in spite of British protests to the contrary – about which we will hear more at the end of the chapter – the evidence collected by the court of inquiry and other sources indicate that local conditions alone could not account for the drastic decision to mutiny. Rather, the sepoys took action after a long period of assessing the news and information they received from events and people tied to places as far-flung as India, Canada, the United States, Britain, Germany, and the Ottoman Empire.

### The Malay States Guides

Let us begin with the Malay States Guides, whose actions and overall demeanor played an important role in the outlook of the men of the

<sup>29</sup> Until 1902, the 5th had been numbered as the 42nd. It had gone through many changes in its composition since 1857, from high-caste Brahmins to completely Muslim troops from Eastern Punjab. Tarling, "The Merest Pustule," 27.

5th. The Guides had originally been formed for duties in peninsular Malaya, but were moved to Singapore in the fall of 1914 in anticipation of being deployed overseas for the war. The regiment was composed of Indians recruited both locally and in India, the bulk of whom were Sikhs, with the remainder comprising Pathans, Punjabi Muslims, and a few Hindus.<sup>30</sup> There was no history of trouble with the regiment, and in fact sources indicate British authorities thought of them highly. While being formally inspected in 1907, for example, the Field Marshal wrote that the commanding officer should be commended, because “the state of efficiency to which he has brought the Malay States Guides reflects the greatest credit on himself.”<sup>31</sup>

Shortly after the war broke out, the commanding officer of the Guides had written to the War Office declaring that the regiment was willing and able to go on active service abroad in support of the war effort. He had done this on the advice of his highest-ranking Indian officer, who – it later turned out – might not have discussed the matter fully with his men.<sup>32</sup> But after they were moved to Singapore for redeployment abroad, it quickly became clear that all was not well in the Malay States Guides. The first indication occurred on November 24, 1914, when the Guides’ Commanding Officer received an anonymous letter saying that some of the Indian officers were encouraging their men to refuse overseas service.<sup>33</sup> Shortly thereafter, when the regiment was ordered to proceed overseas to East Africa, the men made their unwillingness to go plain. In a letter signed “The Men of the Malay States Guides,” they argued that their terms of service did not include the obligation to serve abroad.<sup>34</sup> As a result, in early December 1914 the Commanding Officer of the Guides was forced to withdraw the offer to serve overseas, much to his great embarrassment. Then in January 1915, all but one mountain battery of artillery was sent back to peninsular Malaya in disgrace.

What had happened to this efficient and dependable regiment during its brief stay in Singapore? An official British enquiry into the matter concluded, against substantial evidence, that the primary causes behind the Guides’ unwillingness to serve had been because of disputes about

<sup>30</sup> When the regiment was inspected in 1907 at Penang, it consisted of 662 Jat Sikhs, 73 Punjabi Muslims, 69 Pathans, and 6 Hindus. Report 17871, May 20, 1907, Straits Settlements Original Correspondence: War Office, CO 273/334.

<sup>31</sup> Report 17871, May 20, 1907, Straits Settlements Original Correspondence.

<sup>32</sup> Tarling, “The Merest Pustule,” 41.

<sup>33</sup> Malcolm Murfett, *Between Two Oceans*, 160.

<sup>34</sup> The progression of events relating to the Malay States Guides’ refusal to serve overseas is documented in Malay States Guides: Withdrawal of Offer to Volunteer for Foreign Service and Subsequent Renewal of Offer, India Office Library, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261.

overseas pay and various nonpolitical “intrigues” by its Indian officers.<sup>35</sup> But statements made by individuals within the Guides clearly demonstrate that they conceived their discontent in terms of global events outside the immediate orbit of Singapore.

One of the most important of these events was the journey of the Japanese ship *Komagata Maru*.<sup>36</sup> The ship had been chartered in early 1914 by an Indian man, Gurdit Singh, to carry 376 Indian passengers (of whom 340 were Sikhs and twenty-four Muslim) from Hong Kong to Vancouver, with the purpose of deliberately challenging Canadian laws restricting Indian immigration.<sup>37</sup> However, once the ship arrived in the port of Vancouver it was not allowed to dock, nor were its passengers allowed to disembark. The passengers were forced to wait on board ship for two months in difficult conditions while their fate was decided, only to discover at the end that the entire ship had been ordered back to India. The *Komagata Maru* thus left Vancouver under escort by the Canadian military on July 23, 1914. When it finally reached Calcutta, India, on September 26, the outraged and weary passengers touselled with British authorities who were intent on treating them as prisoners. The altercation resulted in the passengers being fired upon by the authorities, during which nineteen of the Indians on board were killed.

The *Komagata Maru* incident galvanized anti-British sentiment among many Indians around the world, particularly among Sikhs and Punjabis. Soldiers in the Indian army were particularly outraged, since many of the potential settlers aboard the ship had served in the army themselves. News of the *Komagata Maru* easily reached the Malay States Guides, who informed their officers that the treatment of Sikhs and other Punjabis on the ship indicated that the colonial government did not hold the service of Indians in high regard, and that they therefore were not willing to sacrifice their lives abroad.<sup>38</sup> The letter they sent to their commanding officer refusing to serve in East Africa is worth quoting at length in this regard:

As our brethren who have been shot in the Komagatamaru [sic] case have troubled and grieved us, some of us have lost dear brothers and other blood-relations, we can never forget the kindness of the Indian Government (British) for shooting and slaughtering the dead who lost their livings in India in the hopes of earning

<sup>35</sup> Murfett, *Between Two Oceans*, 160.

<sup>36</sup> For a full account, see Hugh J.M. Johnston, *The Voyage of the Komagata Maru: The Sikh Challenge to Canada's Colour Bar* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2014).

<sup>37</sup> Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia*, 47.

<sup>38</sup> For an extended treatment of the *Komagata Maru* and its impact on shaping the direction of the mutiny in Singapore, see Kuwajima, *Mutiny in Singapore*, 16–33.

money and better livings in America from which country they were expelled, and were not allowed to land and returned, but the Indian Government again taking the poor dead as seditious people, did not allow them to land at their own home even. When we have no right to walk freely on our own land then what do you want us for in other countries? As we are butchered in our own country we cannot expect better treatment from other countries, therefore we strongly tell you that we will not go to other countries to fight except those mentioned in our agreement sheets.<sup>39</sup>

In the court of inquiry prompted by the Guides' resistance to service abroad, the regiment's British officers testified they were aware that their men had heard damaging stories not only about the *Komagata Maru* but also about massive casualty rates in the War and the awesome power of the German military.<sup>40</sup> Thus, even though the court of inquiry finally concluded that external influences had not caused the disaffection in the Guides, its own summary contradicted its conclusions by noting that the unfortunate voyage of the *Komagata Maru*, not to mention sedition from outside the regiment, had in fact played a role.<sup>41</sup>

News of the refusal by Canadian authorities to let the ship land was widely reported in both mainstream and radical newspapers around the world. In Singapore, every stage of the voyage was covered in the English-language papers the *Straits Times* and the *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, beginning in April 1914 when the ship arrived in Shanghai.<sup>42</sup> Between April and December 1914, no fewer than twenty-five stories appeared, many of them quite long and detailed, describing the struggles of the Indians to land in Vancouver and the violence used against them both there and in India. As we will see, radical revolutionary newspapers found in Singapore during the same period also reported the ship's journey and the suffering of its passengers. Thus during the fall of 1914, it would have been almost impossible for the Malay States Guides not to hear about the difficulties experienced by their co-religionists, either via discussion of English-language papers or through reports in Indian papers published in Urdu or Gurmukhi.

The Indian community in Singapore had another reason to be interested in the fate of the *Komagata Maru*, because Gurdit Singh, the Indian financial sponsor and organizer of the ship's voyage, had lived in British Malaya and Singapore for some years prior to the beginning of the ship's journey in April 1914. Because of this, reports in the papers were likely amplified by local individuals who knew Singh personally. And those

<sup>39</sup> Report 6471, February 9, 1915. Straits Settlements Original Correspondence: Foreign and India Offices, 1915, CO 273/433.

<sup>40</sup> Murfett, *Between Two Oceans*, 160. <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>42</sup> *Straits Times* April 21, 1914, 8.

who identified with the struggles of those on board may have felt an even closer bond with the passengers when the ship anchored in Singapore for three days, from September 16 to 19, after being forced back to India from Canada. Even though the Singapore government did not allow the passengers in the *Komagata Maru* to come ashore for fear they would spread disaffection among the Indian community, news of its presence was widely known and discussed. Several months after the mutiny, the Governor admitted that “though the ship had no communication with the land, yet it left a bad effect” on the Indian troops stationed there.<sup>43</sup>

The outrage over the *Komagata Maru* expressed by the Malay States Guides in their anonymous letter of December 1914 appears to have been fed by a well-developed group of pro-German Indian revolutionaries active in Singapore at the time. One of the links to this revolutionary network was a merchant named Kasim Mansur. After the Guides’ refusal to serve in December, a corporal in the unit persuaded Mansur to write a letter to the Turkish consul at Rangoon indicating that the Guides were ready to turn against the British, and asking the Turkish authorities to send a warship to Singapore to support them. The letter was intercepted by British authorities in Rangoon, and on January 23, 1915 Mansur was arrested in Singapore.<sup>44</sup> In light of the mutiny of the 5th less than a month later, Mansur’s actions were deemed seditious enough that he was tried and hanged on May 31, 1915.

Mansur himself was a known supporter of the radical nationalist Indian Ghadar Party, about which we will hear more below.<sup>45</sup> What we need to know now is that the Ghadar Party was openly pro-German once war was declared, and that the Germans provided funds for Ghadar activists around the world to spread anti-British propaganda amongst Indian communities.<sup>46</sup> We also know that the Malay States Guides, in addition

<sup>43</sup> Letter from the Governor of the Straits Settlements to the Secretary of State for the Colonies Regarding Court of Inquiry and Causes of Mutiny, August 15, 1915. Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 711.

<sup>44</sup> Murfet, *Between Two Oceans*, 161. The letter was suspicious in any case because the Turkish consul left Rangoon once war was declared between the Ottomans and the British.

<sup>45</sup> Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia*, 191.

<sup>46</sup> There has been some very good work on this subject in the last decade, including Tilman Lüdke, *Jihad Made in Germany: Ottoman and German Propaganda and Intelligence Operations in the First World War* (Münster; London: LIT; Global [distributor], 2005); Kris Manjappa, “The Illusions of Encounter: Muslim ‘Minds’ and Hindu Revolutionaries in First World War Germany and After,” *Journal of Global History*, no. 1 (2006): 363–82; Andrew Jarboe, “World War I and the Imperial Moment” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Northeastern University, 2013); and chapter 10 in Suzanne L. Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship*, Publications of the German Historical Institute (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

to likely hearing pro-German sentiments from people like Mansur, were detailed to guard German prisoners of war in Singapore, some of whom were hostile military prisoners. By December 1914, the British official in charge of the POW camp, Major General Reade, felt compelled to inform the Governor that “the German prisoners of war at Tanglin had attempted to tamper with the native sentries [of the Malay States Guides] guarding them.”<sup>47</sup>

The point of all this is that once the Guides arrived in Singapore, the inflammatory nature of the *Komagata Maru* voyage – whose journey was being tracked at every step – reinforced deliberate schemes to spread disaffection among Indians worldwide. Moreover, the Guides were exposed to such ideas not only by revolutionary Indians like Mansur, but by Germans themselves who hoped to shift their loyalties. Clearly, these influences on the morale of the Guides indicate that the men imagined themselves as part of a global network of Indians abroad. British authorities certainly believed this to be the case when they suggested that the Guides had been in contact with revolutionaries in India weeks before writing the letter to their commanding officer, when they made their plans to refuse service known. As evidence of this communication, the British report noted that the *Simla Weekly Secret Diary* – a revolutionary paper in the Punjab – had predicted in November 1914 that “A local Regiment from Singapore will also refuse to go on Service.”<sup>48</sup>

Notwithstanding later protests to the contrary, by late December 1914 it should have been reasonably clear to British authorities that not only was there already serious discontent within the Malay States Guides stationed in Singapore, but that clear avenues existed for sepoys to make contact with people outside the regiment – both Indian and German – who themselves had grievances with British authority. In fact, a letter from March 4, 1915 indicates that the decision to transfer the 5th out of Singapore in the first place stemmed from the belief that the Malay States Guides were part of a conspiracy against British rule, “and that the Indian Regiment here [the 5th] might be affected by it.” Thus, the writer argued, “The authorities resolved therefore to send this regiment to Hong Kong.”<sup>49</sup>

Let us step back now and visualize the situation of the 5th Light Infantry, garrisoned as it was on this small island with the Guides

<sup>47</sup> Letter from Governor Young to Secretary of State, August 19, 1915. Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 710.

<sup>48</sup> Malay States Guides: Withdrawal of Offer to Volunteer for Foreign Service and Subsequent Renewal of Offer, 1914, IOR/L/MIL/7/17261.

<sup>49</sup> Unsigned letter, March 4, 1915. Memorandums and Telegrams Relating to Disturbances at Singapore.

during the winter months of 1914–1915 until the latter's departure in late January. As we know, the 5th had arrived in Singapore in October 1914 from India's Central Provinces and was serving its first overseas duty. Its members were overwhelmingly from the Punjab – like many men of the Guides – and included four companies composed mostly of Rajputs, two of Jats, and two of Pathans. Unlike the Guides, the men of the 5th were almost all Muslim. While the two units were in Singapore together, the men had plenty of opportunity to interact, since individuals in the Guides and the 5th were at liberty to move about Singapore among the city's large Indian population.<sup>50</sup> Once the Guides had taken the step of refusing service overseas, it was common knowledge all over Singapore and would have easily reached the 5th. But there were also direct links between the men of the two regiments. A secret agent who had been employed by General Ridout to monitor the morale of the troops after the Ottoman Empire entered the war testified that Muslims in the Guides and Muslims in the 5th Light Infantry commonly attended the Kampung Java mosque together in the city. The imam of the mosque, Nur Alam Shah, was said to be hostile to the British, was believed to be a member of a revolutionary movement (Ghadar?), and was believed to have played a role in the Guides' refusal of service.<sup>51</sup> After the mutiny, he was arrested for sheltering some of the mutineers and giving them disguises so they could escape.<sup>52</sup> Another connection was Kasim Mansur, the Ghadar activist who had written the letter to the Turkish consul at Rangoon for the Guides. As he had done with the Guides, Mansur also made a point of becoming friendly with a number of officers and men of the 5th after their arrival.<sup>53</sup> The findings of the court of inquiry's report into the mutiny of the 5th indicated that Mansur had made a habit of visiting the lines of the 5th and had hosted men of both the Guides and the 5th in his home many times.

What this means is that immediately upon arriving in Singapore, the men of the 5th had ample opportunity to hear about the reasons for the dissatisfaction of the Guides, to share in their outrage over the fate of the *Komagata Maru* passengers, and to be exposed to the opinions of at least two anti-British activists. What seems plain is that even though British authorities decided to remove the Guides from Singapore in order to break their connections with such influences, they did not remove the influences themselves. The result was that the 5th ended up being

<sup>50</sup> The size of the Indian community in Singapore, as of the 1911 census, was 24,494. Kuwajima, *Mutiny in Singapore*, 5.

<sup>51</sup> Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia*, 288. <sup>52</sup> Testimony of T. R. Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 616.

<sup>53</sup> Proceeding of Court of Inquiry. Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 39.



exposed to the same German–Indian–Turkish propaganda, and even the same German prisoners, as the Guides. The difference in the 5th was that the regiment actually mutinied.

### The German–Indian–Turkish Plot

While the disaffection of the Guides surely influenced the overall morale of the 5th during the four months they were on Singapore together, sympathy with the grievances of another unit would have been unlikely to convince soldiers to mutiny. Rather, close interaction with an already deeply disaffected unit likely opened the eyes of some of the men in the 5th to anti-British perspectives. If receptiveness to such perspectives also translated into identification with the grievances of the Guides as fellow Punjabis serving an oppressive regime, it was not a far jump to grow increasingly receptive to the same influences that had sharpened the disaffection of the Guides. An escalating factor in the 5th was that, in contrast to the Guides, the regiment was almost entirely Muslim – and by late 1914 much of the Indian and German propaganda inciting revolution among colonial subjects was directed at Muslims. Thus when the 5th increasingly came into contact with both people and print that aimed to inspire sepoys to turn against the British, they were confronted with messages that appealed specifically to their identity as Muslims. In Singapore, one of the most important ways they came by these messages was through the activities of the Ghadar party, which during the war was directly funded by the German government.

Ghadar had developed independently of German aid in 1913 among Indian expatriates in California, many of whom were Sikhs from the Punjab. Sikhs in particular had settled along the west coast of North America in the early years of the twentieth century in order to escape conditions of poverty at home.<sup>54</sup> But once in the United States and Canada they experienced increasingly hostile discrimination, not only at the state level but also from white communities. In fact, “Asians” of any nationality faced harsh discrimination on the Pacific coast of North America at this time, and were subject to laws that sought to limit immigration and property accumulation as well as violence and race riots.<sup>55</sup> Explicit among the limitations white communities sought to impose was to restrict Indian

<sup>54</sup> Harish K. Puri, *Ghadar Movement: Ideology, Organization, and Strategy*, 2nd edn. (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 1993), 15.

<sup>55</sup> Both the United States and Canada passed laws in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries designed to prevent “Asian” immigration, beginning with the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 in the United States, and followed by the 1903 Chinese Immigration Act in Canada. Exclusion of Chinese immigrants was followed by restricting

women from immigrating with their husbands and families. As a result, until 1912 the Indian immigrant population was composed entirely of men, which was a source of bitter complaint among them. The restriction on Indian women was intended to prevent Indians from establishing settled, self-propagating, racially distinct communities. By preventing female immigration, whites hoped the Indian population would be temporary sojourners for the purposes of work rather than permanent migrants.<sup>56</sup> Indians, for their part, argued that they possessed the same male rights to establish families and to head households as any white North American, and explicitly challenged these laws by attempting to gain entry for their wives.

Indians undergoing such hostile pressures sought help from the British authorities, only to discover that the authorities did not want to fight for Indian liberty in North America because of fears that it would create similar expectations in India.<sup>57</sup> Frustrated by British unresponsiveness, and taking it as yet another indication of British misrule over Indians everywhere, expatriate Indians in California determined that the solution to the problem was to overthrow British rule in India via armed rebellion. In 1914, one of the movement's leaders deplored the situation in which "our men, who valiantly shed their blood . . . can not have the privilege of bringing their wives and children in the lands of the British colonies." The response, he argued, must be "to remedy this situation, and acquire our inalienable rights."<sup>58</sup> The name Ghadar was descriptive of its intended methods, since the word means "mutiny." It was chosen deliberately to recall the Indian Rebellion of 1857, when a significant portion of the Bengal army and peasants in north-central India rose up against British power.

In November 1913, the party published the first issue of its newspaper – also called *Ghadar* – and distributed it in the United States, Canada,

the immigration of Japanese citizens in both countries. In 1908, the Canadian government passed legislation designed to restrict Asian immigration from any location by mandating that all immigrants possess at least \$200 Canadian on arrival. Puri, *Ghadar Movement*, 31–32. For more context on the restriction of Asian immigration on the Pacific coast of North America, see Adam McKeown, *Melancholy Order: Asian Migration and the Globalization of Borders* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), and Andrew Gyory, *Closing the Gate: Race, Politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

<sup>56</sup> Enakshi Dua discusses this in the context of Canada in "Racialising Imperial Canada: Indian Women and the Making of Ethnic Communities," in Antoinette Burton, ed., *Gender, Sexuality, and Colonial Modernities* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 123.

<sup>57</sup> Puri, *Ghadar Movement*, 37.

<sup>58</sup> Taraknath Das, *The Hindustanee*, April 1, 1914. Quoted in Enakshi Dua, "Racialising Imperial Canada," 127.

and India, and in other areas with significant Indian populations or garrisons, including South and East Africa, Hong Kong, Burma, Malaya, and Singapore. The first issue was unambiguous about the party's intentions:

A new epoch in the history of India opens today, the 1st November, 1913, because today there begins in foreign lands but in our country's language a war against the English Raj. . . what is our name? Mutiny. What is our work? Mutiny. Where will the mutiny break out? In India. When? In a few years. Why? Because the people can no longer bear the oppression and tyranny practiced under British rule and are ready to fight and die for freedom.<sup>59</sup>

Although Ghadar's leadership was made up mostly of literate Hindus (one of its founding members, Har Dayal, was a lecturer in Indian philosophy and Sanskrit), the party openly appealed to the grievances of other Indians as well. It was most successful, at least initially, with the poor Sikh peasants who had moved to the western U.S. and Canada and experienced first-hand anti-Asian discrimination. But the party's paper also made early efforts to include Indian Muslims, even though Har Dayal himself was known for being openly hostile to Muslims.<sup>60</sup> Just after the launch of the *Ghadar* paper, the December issue acknowledged that while "in the beginning few Mahommedans also belonged to this party. . . now all the young men are joining it."<sup>61</sup>

When the war began, *Ghadar* not only continued to insist that all groups of Indians must fight to overthrow the British but also began to focus special attention on sepoys in the vast Indian Army. These men, Ghadar leaders believed, would be particularly useful to win over because of their military training and access to weapons.<sup>62</sup> On August 4, 1914 the *Ghadar* paper exhorted:

Warriors. If you start to mutiny now you will put an end to the British government. . . Go to Indian [sic] and incite the native troops. Preach mutiny openly. Take arms from the troops of the native states and wherever you see British kill them.<sup>63</sup>

Not surprisingly, British authorities in India were alarmed at such calls to arms. They worked through the British consul in San Francisco to monitor the movements of Dayal and other Ghadar activists, and in February 1914 succeeded in convincing U.S. authorities to arrest and deport Dayal. Before he could be deported, however, Dayal escaped to

<sup>59</sup> T.R. Sareen, *Select Documents on the Ghadar Party* (New Delhi: Mouto Publishing House, 1994), 84.

<sup>60</sup> Manjapra, "The Illusions of Encounter," 371.

<sup>61</sup> December 16, 1913. Sareen, *Select Documents on the Ghadar Party*, 88.

<sup>62</sup> Rammath, *Haj to Utopia*, 55. <sup>63</sup> Sareen, *Select Documents on the Ghadar Party*, 85.

Switzerland, and in early 1914 made his way to Germany.<sup>64</sup> In any case, removing Dayal from the United States did not stop the publication of *Ghadar*, which continued to be published in San Francisco under the leadership of Ram Chandra and distributed around the world. In March 1914, a British Foreign Office memorandum noted that copies had been found in Singapore, Hong Kong, and British concessions in China.<sup>65</sup> In such locations, Sikh Gurdwaras (temples) became centers of Ghadar activity, where worshippers read poems from the paper aloud and discussed politics after prayers.<sup>66</sup> In areas with large Indian Muslim populations, mosques served the same purpose, as the Kampung Java mosque in Singapore apparently did.

Once the war broke out, *Ghadar's* attention to Muslim disaffection grew sharper. This was due in large part to the formal connection Ghadar leaders forged with the German government immediately before the war. As we know, Har Dayal arrived in Berlin early in 1914, and by July other prominent Ghadar activists joined him. The Germans formalized the relationship by creating a Committee for Indian Independence, a department whose task it was to create anti-British propaganda for British colonial subjects and to coordinate the shipment of arms into India.<sup>67</sup> For Dayal and Ghadar more generally, the alliance with the Germans was an opportunity to attain financial, logistical, and technical support for furthering its own ends. For the Germans, it was a means of securing its explicit war aim of encouraging the collapse of the Raj via armed rebellion.<sup>68</sup> As the *Ghadar* put it on July 21, 1914, "All intelligent people know that Germany is an enemy of Great Britain. We also are the mortal enemy of the British Government and an enemy of my enemy is my friend."<sup>69</sup>

Once the war began, Ghadar activists began not only to send propaganda around the world but – with German money – they also sent people. Part of this effort was to send fighters directly to India. One source estimated that Ghadar had sent 8,000 people to India for this

<sup>64</sup> Richard Popplewell, "The Surveillance of Indian 'Seditionists' in North America, 1905–1915," in Richard Popplewell, Christopher Andrew, and Jeremy Noakes, eds., *Intelligence And International Relations, 1900–1945*, Exeter Studies in History (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1987), 62, 65, 69.

<sup>65</sup> Sareen, *Select Documents on Ghadar Party*, 59; for the efforts made by British authorities to penetrate the Ghadar party, see Harold A. Gould, *Sikhs, Swamis, Students, and Spies: The India Lobby in the United States, 1900–1946* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006), 210.

<sup>66</sup> Puri, *Ghadar Movement*, 85.

<sup>67</sup> Manjapra, "The Illusions of Encounter," 372; Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia*, 73.

<sup>68</sup> This is the subject of Peter Hopkirk's *Like Hidden Fire: The Plot to Bring Down the British Empire* (New York: Kodansha USA, 1997).

<sup>69</sup> Sareen, *Select Documents on the Ghadr Party*, 85.

purpose.<sup>70</sup> But beginning in September and October 1914 – just months before the Singapore Mutiny – Ghadarites also left North America for the Far East. Specific target areas included Hong Kong, the Malay States, Rangoon, and Singapore – each of which had Indian Army garrisons that Ghadarites were eager to penetrate.

During this period, the *Ghadar* explicitly and regularly exhorted Indians to support Germany in any way possible during the war. On August 18, 1914, an article titled “O Hindus, Help the Germans” encouraged Indians to take the opportunity of Britain’s weakness to mutiny. On September 8, 1914, the *Ghadar* prophesied “Germany is going to defeat England. German [sic] have taken the whole of France: and Russia too has been dismantled.” And on December 8, 1915 an article cried: “Rise up: for the day will come when your flag will be respected throughout the world . . . Soon, with the aid of the Germans and Turkey, your enemies will be slain. This is the opportune time.”<sup>71</sup>

Although the Indo-German partnership provided needed finances for the work of Ghadar, being in the pay of the German government meant an adjustment to German priorities – and one of those priorities was encouraging British Muslim subjects to rebel.<sup>72</sup> German interest in the potential of Muslims to weaken the British Empire was not new. Much to the irritation of the British, Kaiser Wilhelm II had been styling himself a special “friend” to the 300 million Muslims of the world since 1898. Wilhelm also gave much credence to the opinions of the eccentric Max von Oppenheim – a sometime consul in the Near East, legal counsel to the emperor and, during the war, chief of Intelligence Services in the East – who had been conceiving of ways to work with Muslim subjects against British rule since the early twentieth century.<sup>73</sup> As Kris Manjappa has argued, Oppenheim helped convince Wilhelm that Muslims could be radicalized and encouraged to revolt against British rule, particularly in India. But unfortunately for Oppenheim and the Germans who listened to him, his focus on Indian Muslims tended to blind him to the fact that the most visible Indian revolutionary groups – including those who made up the Committee for Indian Independence – were composed mostly of Hindus and Sikhs.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia*, 50. <sup>71</sup> Sareen, *Select Documents on Ghadar Party*, 86.

<sup>72</sup> German efforts to stir up discontent among Muslims were not limited to Britain, and in fact included all the Allies. However, Manjappa argues that British Muslims were a special concern. Manjappa, “The Illusions of Encounter,” 366.

<sup>73</sup> Manjappa, “The Illusions of Encounter,” 365, 368–69.

<sup>74</sup> The Hindu/Muslim tension caused by the German connection, and German officials’ belief that revolution would come from Muslims, created some odd situations. Germany sent Indians not only to the Far East but also to North Africa and the Middle East in order to incite Muslim rebellion. The fact that most of the Indians they sent were

After the Ottoman Empire entered the war on the side of the Central Powers on October 28, 1914, Oppenheim convinced the Kaiser – in the face of skepticism in German civilian and military quarters – of the viability of a jihadist strategy.<sup>75</sup> On the Ottoman side, although the ruling party was not initially convinced about the advisability of such a strategy, it was difficult, as Tilman Ludke has argued, “to overlook the potential of Islam as a bond between the Muslim inhabitants of the Ottoman Empire and a tool for attracting sympathy and support throughout the Muslim world.”<sup>76</sup> On entering the war, the Ottomans had already declared the liberation of occupied Muslim lands as a specific war aim. Then on November 14, 1914, the highest religious authority in the empire declared a jihad on behalf of the Sultan Caliph, Mehmed V, demanding that “the Moslem subjects of Russia, of France, of England and of all the countries that side with them in their land and sea attacks dealt against the Caliphate for the purpose of annihilating Islam” must “take part in the holy War against the respective governments from which they depend.”<sup>77</sup>

From this point forward, both Germans and Ottomans sought to capitalize on the Sultan’s claim to be caliph, the highest position of Islamic authority. The Committee for Indian Independence helped to spread propaganda, in *Ghadar* and other publications, indicating that Kaiser Wilhelm had converted to Islam, and that large segments of the German population had converted as well.<sup>78</sup> Muslim soldiers continued to be of particular interest to the Committee.<sup>79</sup> In order to reach as many Muslim soldiers as possible, the editors of *Ghadar* published special pamphlets in languages like Pushtu (spoken in Afghanistan and parts of North-west India). One example, from August 1915, represented an attempt

Hindus induced the Germans to ask them to change their names in order to sound authentically Muslim. Manjapra, “The Illusions of Encounter,” 372, 375.

<sup>75</sup> Lüdke argues that Oppenheim managed this almost single-handedly. Lüdke, *Jihad Made in Germany*, 48. Although this will be discussed in later chapters, it is important to note that it was the Ottomans who pushed the Germans for a formal alliance and not the other way around. At least initially, neither side entered the alliance with the goal of creating a platform for a jihadist strategy, and Lüdke makes it clear that the Ottomans were not at all enthusiastic about this idea at first (48). For an excellent monograph on Ottoman strategy during World War I, see Aksakal, *The Ottoman Road to War in 1914*.

<sup>76</sup> Lüdke, *Jihad Made in Germany*, 49.

<sup>77</sup> Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 94, 110; McMeekin, *The Berlin-Baghdad Express*, 124. Text of the fatwa taken from *Source Records of the Great War*, Vol. III, Charles F. Horne, ed., National Alumni 1923. [www.firstworldwar.com/source/ottoman\\_fetva.htm](http://www.firstworldwar.com/source/ottoman_fetva.htm).

<sup>78</sup> Peter Hopkirk, *Like Hidden Fire*, 3. <sup>79</sup> Puri, *Ghadar Movement*, 107.

to reach soldiers fighting for the British on the Northwest Frontier. This particular pamphlet claimed:

The wicked English and their allies are now attacking Islam, but the German Emperor and the Sultan of Turkey have sworn to liberate Asia from the tyranny. Now is the time to rise . . . Only your strength and religious zeal are required.<sup>80</sup>

Closer to Singapore, in January 1915, British censors in Burma intercepted 104 envelopes containing copies of the *Ghadar* paper, in three languages. Among and within these papers were also copies of a Turkish paper called the *Jahan-i-Islam* (Islamic World). The paper contained a speech by Enver Pasha, War Minister and Commander-in-Chief of Ottoman forces, that declared:

This is the time that the Ghadar should be introduced in India . . . Hindus and Muhammedans, you are both soldiers of the army and you are brothers, and the low degraded English man is your enemy; you should become ghazis by declaring jihad and combining with your brothers to murder the English and liberate India.<sup>81</sup>

It is not certain whether similar material produced by Turkish sources also reached Singapore, although given the vast amounts of illicit materials constantly circulating through the island colony, it seems perfectly reasonable that some would have done so. We do know, however, that *Ghadar* was found in Singapore and that individual pro-German Muslims like Kasim Mansur and Nur Alam Shah – reportedly members of Ghadar themselves – were believed to have encouraged sepoys and civilians alike to align themselves with Britain's enemies.

Thus far, we have a lot of circumstantial evidence that the men of the 5th had opportunities to interact with the Guides and with Ghadar activists, and that pan-Islamic, pro-German printed material circulated in Singapore. We also have undisputed evidence that the 5th did in fact mutiny on February 15. In many instances like this, such a circumstantial case marks the limits of what we can know, leaving us to make the connections between the fragments of evidence. In this case, however, the massive amount of evidence collected and preserved by the Court of Inquiry into the causes of the mutiny allows us to hear – albeit imperfectly – from some of the officers and men of the 5th themselves.

The court of inquiry collected two types of evidence from the men of the 5th. The first was testimony taken in the immediate aftermath of the mutiny, and the second was letters that had been intercepted by the

<sup>80</sup> Puri, *Ghadar Movement*, 110.      <sup>81</sup> Kuwajima, *Mutiny in Singapore*, 41.

editor. The first kind of evidence is of course deeply problematic, not least because the forty-three days in which the court sat – February 20 to April 4 – occurred simultaneously with the court-martials of those suspected of involvement in the mutiny. What this means is that the court was taking testimony from hundreds of sepoys in the 5th as their comrades were being sentenced and executed. A huge amount was at stake for each man, and many – if not all – must have feared either for their own lives or for the lives of their friends and relatives if they were to say too much, or to say the wrong thing.<sup>82</sup>

Only those sepoys who were known to have actively helped the British were considered above suspicion: Everyone else was asked to explain and justify their actions during the mutiny. Since large numbers of sepoys had deserted their posts and remained in hiding for several days, they had a lot to explain. Many were intent on describing themselves as ignorant of the coming mutiny, afraid for their lives as it began, and eager to turn themselves in – unarmed – as soon as possible. Given the level of discontent in the regiment, it seems likely that many sepoys lied, feigned ignorance, or refrained from telling the whole truth when questioned by the court. The testimony of Bahadur Khan, a servant to one of the British captains in the regiment, responded like many others when asked to elaborate on his statement that he had heard trouble was brewing in the regiment. Khan insisted, “I cannot say who said it; men were talking. I cannot say why there should be trouble. I don’t know what kind of trouble. I heard it from lots of people. I cannot remember anyone who told me.”<sup>83</sup> Even more common were those who maintained, like Colour Havildar Mohammed Hassan, “I am absolutely unable to say what the cause of the mutiny was. I know nothing about any cause of discontent or anything of that sort.”<sup>84</sup>

The second type of evidence collected from the men of the 5th was letters intercepted by the censor in the days and weeks just prior to the mutiny. While such letters might be seen as more reliable than testimony taken in life and death circumstances, nevertheless they have their own difficulties. For starters, many men were not literate, and thus had an intermediary compose their letters. Not only that, only the translated English copies of the letters now exist, which means the translation cannot be checked against the originals. Finally, the sample size is quite small: There are only about ten surviving letters, and we do not know

<sup>82</sup> A number of men in the 5th had relatives serving in the unit, both by blood and by marriage.

<sup>83</sup> Sareen, *Secret Documents on Singapore Mutiny 1915*, Vol. 2, 72.

<sup>84</sup> Sareen, *Secret Documents on Singapore Mutiny*, 60.



how many other, “harmless” letters may have been sent at about the same time.

Notwithstanding these problems, the evidence collected from the 5th can give us at least a partial glimpse into the kinds of things the men were saying and observing just before and during the mutiny. Both letters and testimony indicate that the men had heard rumors about German sympathies for Islam. For example, just before the mutiny, Lance Naik Fateh Mohammed wrote to his father in the Punjab:

The Germans have become Mohammedans. Haji Mahmood William Kaiser and his daughter has married the heir to the Turkish throne, who is to succeed after the Sultan. Many of the German subjects and army have embraced Mohammedism. Please God that the religion of the Germans (Mohammedism) may be promoted or raised on high.<sup>85</sup>

When confronted by the court of inquiry about the letter, Mohammed admitted writing it but insisted, “I do not think this is true but it is what I heard in the lines. Abdul Hamid (bugler) told me. I wrote it through foolishness.”<sup>86</sup> At that point, the court decided to question Abdul Hamid, who said he had seen reports about the Germans being Muslim in a newspaper. When asked to identify the paper, he said “I never saw the newspaper myself. I don’t know what newspaper.”<sup>87</sup>

It is very likely that both Mohammed and Hamid lied to protect themselves in their testimony before the court. In Mohammed’s letter, there is no indication that he did not believe what he was saying. In Hamid’s testimony, it would have been quite damaging if he admitted to having read proscribed material such as *Ghadar* or other propaganda produced by the Committee for Indian Independence. What is important here is not whether or not each man was telling the truth, but that the combination of the censored letter and the testimony allows us to see that at least some men had seen reports about Germans converting to Islam and had shared it with other sepoys, and that at least some men seemed to believe it. Whether Hamid had actually seen the paper himself or not, the testimony of his fellow soldiers indicates that many sepoys were hearing pro-German sentiments regularly from other soldiers.

Snippets gleaned from the testimony of a wide variety of men indicate that they were exposed to pro-German, pan-Islamic sentiments not only via newspapers but also via other people as well. For the most part, the people mentioned in this regard were not the “outside influences” mentioned in the court of inquiry, such as Kasim Mansur or the Imam

<sup>85</sup> Sareen, *Secret Documents on the Singapore Mutiny*, 731.

<sup>86</sup> Sareen, *Secret Documents on the Singapore Mutiny*, 122.

<sup>87</sup> Sareen, *Secret Documents on the Singapore Mutiny*, 122.

Nur Alam Shah. In fact, although many men of the 5th admitted to either having heard of Nur Alam Shah or to having occasionally attended the Kampong Java mosque, nearly all denied ever having heard the holy man raise seditious ideas. On the other hand, two secret agents in the employ of British authorities said exactly the opposite. In the words of one secret agent:

He [Nur Alam Shah] is always talking sedition and against the British government. He preaches fanatical doctrines daily. Batches of 5th Light Infantry used to listen to his preachings and used to give him offerings of money.<sup>88</sup>

Whether or not the evidence of the secret agents was reliable, the men of the 5th were adamant on the subject. If what the secret agents were saying was true, however, it is possible the sepoys were afraid to admit having attended ceremonies in which seditious things were being said, or even that they hoped to protect men like Nur Alam Shah from the British.

In contrast to their reticence to discuss the role played by outsiders, many men of the 5th implicated their fellow soldiers as the agents of “seditious ideas.” Several in particular were mentioned over and over, particularly the Indian officers Jemadar Chiste Khan, Subedar Dunde Khan, Jemadar Abdul Ali, the NCO Colour Havildar Imtiaz Ali (reputed to have fired the first shot), and Taj Mohammed.<sup>89</sup> For example, when asked about the causes of the mutiny, Lance Naik Fazal Asim said:

All I can tell you is this: that Chiste Khan used to talk to my section in “D” Company and tell them all the news with regard to the war that was unfavorable to the Sirkar [British government]. We used to hear news of the successes of the British, at which we were very pleased. Chiste Khan would say the exact opposite; that the British had been defeated, etc.<sup>90</sup>

Similarly, Lance Naik Maksud testified that he heard Dunde Khan, Abdul Ali, and Chiste Khan saying that “Germany was making progress and that there would soon be a German Raj instead of a British Raj.”<sup>91</sup> Sub-assistant surgeon R.S. Bell, who was part Indian, also testified that “I saw Jemadar Chiste Khan drawing maps with a stick on the ground showing the theatre of war. There were some fifteen or twenty men around. He said Belgium is taken, France is taken, Japan has left her friendship with England. The Germans will invade England. When I heard him

<sup>88</sup> Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 616. This testimony was corroborated by a second secret agent.

<sup>89</sup> Jemadars and Subedars were commissioned officers. Each company had one of each: subedars wore two stars and jemadars one. Tarling, “The Merest Pustule,” 28. Each of the men listed here were executed for their role in the mutiny.

<sup>90</sup> Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 139–140. <sup>91</sup> Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 79.

going on like this I used to walk away.”<sup>92</sup> Again, Arshad, a sepoy in C company, said “I heard Chiste Khan, Jemadar, say about a fortnight ago, ‘German has taken certain places, Austria has done likewise and Turkey has taken certain places. You people remain watchful.’”<sup>93</sup>

Problematic as the court of inquiry testimony might have been, it seems clear that certain men in the regiment – especially the officers Chiste Khan, Dundee Khan, and Abdul Ali – played key roles in spreading the kind of pro-German information found in Ghadar propaganda to other soldiers. In light of testimony that these officers had been talking this way for “two or three months” before the mutiny, it seems likely they were convinced in their views by contact with the Guides, Ghadar propaganda, and Ghadar supporters prior to the turn of the new year in 1915.<sup>94</sup>

But in January 1915, some of the men of the 5th had a chance to test their views on real Germans, who were being held as prisoners of war at the Tanglin Barracks just outside Singapore. Incredibly, even after British army authorities in Singapore had formally reported to the Governor in December 1914 that the Malay States Guides had been “tampered with” by the German prisoners from the *Emden* at Tanglin, and further that only “white” soldiers should therefore guard them, men of the 5th were nonetheless detailed to replace the Guides for guard duty at the POW camp.<sup>95</sup>

In January 1915, the camp housed 309 German men who were being interned for the duration of the war.<sup>96</sup> Most of the men were German nationals who had been residents in Singapore before the hostilities began. After the declaration of war between Britain and Germany, these men and their families were initially allowed to remain in their homes under a liberal interpretation of house arrest. Things changed in October 1914, however, when on the 28th the German cruiser *Emden* steamed into Penang harbor in British Malaya and promptly sank the Russian cruiser *Zhemtchug* and the French patrol boat *Le Mousquet*.<sup>97</sup> On 9 November, the *Emden* herself was sunk by an Australian cruiser, and several of its officers and men were brought to Singapore as prisoners of war. There, they joined the crew of the *Markomannia*, which had been

<sup>92</sup> Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 98.      <sup>93</sup> Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 129.

<sup>94</sup> Testimony of sepoy Nazim Ali, Subedar Dundee Khan’s orderly. Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 109.

<sup>95</sup> Governor Arthur Young of Singapore wrote that after the mutiny he was “astonished to find . . . that the 5th Native Light Infantry had been mounting guard at the prisoners of war camp at Tanglin,” despite recommendations to the contrary. Letter from the Governor of the Straits Settlements to the Secretary of State for the Colonies Regarding Court of Inquiry and Causes of Mutiny. Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 710–11.

<sup>96</sup> Murfett, *Between Two Oceans*, 163.      <sup>97</sup> Harper and Miller, *Singapore Mutiny*, 17.

sunk near Dutch waters on October 20.<sup>98</sup> During this time, German activities so close to Singapore increased suspicion about the loyalties of German residents on the island. In fact, one of the proprietors of the Singapore branch of a German-owned company called Behn, Meyer, and Company, August Diehn, was believed to have been arranging for the provisioning of the *Emden*.<sup>99</sup> Thereafter, on instructions from London, all German men were interned with the *Emden* and *Markomannia* crews at Tanglin Barracks.<sup>100</sup>

Many of the German prisoners did not do anything to indicate they were interested in stirring up trouble during their incarceration. For example, when a large group of sepoys liberated the camp on February 15, 292 of the 309 inmates ultimately decided not to leave. Instead, they remained in the immediate vicinity of the camp until a British and Japanese force returned to secure the area several days later.<sup>101</sup> But some of the men, like the crews of the *Emden* and *Markomannia*, were hostile military prisoners captured in battle, while others harbored grievances about being interned. It therefore seems reasonable to assume some prisoners had reason to relish the chance of wreaking whatever havoc they could, especially if such havoc might also lead to their escape. In fact, seventeen Germans did take the opportunity provided by the mutiny to escape. Among these, ten were from the ships' crews – including the Lieutenant Commander of the *Emden*, Julius Lauterbach – and three were employees of Behn, Meyer, and Company, including August Diehn himself.<sup>102</sup>

Did some of the German prisoners encourage the men of the 5th to mutiny? As we will see, the British court of inquiry's report made light of this possibility. Yet the evidence suggests that the German prisoners played a far more important role than the official report allowed. Especially when placed in the context of the larger German efforts to subvert Allied colonial rule during the war, the evidence linking some of the prisoners to the mutiny is difficult to ignore.

Let us begin at the liberation of the POW camp and work our way back. When the mutiny broke out, the largest of the three groups of sepoys marched straight away to Tanglin, overpowered and killed the guards, and

<sup>98</sup> "The *Markomannia*," *Straits Times*, October 20, 1914, 9.

<sup>99</sup> Karen Snow, "Russia and the British, and the 1915 Indian Mutiny in Singapore," *Southeast Asia Research* 5, no. 3 (1997), 309.

<sup>100</sup> Harper and Miller, *Singapore Mutiny*, 18.

<sup>101</sup> Sho Kuwajima, *Mutiny in Singapore*, 106. This did not necessarily mean the prisoners were well-disposed toward the British, and in fact the German prisoners Hageman and Hanke both testified that anti-British feelings were high among many of the prisoners. For example, Hanke testimony in Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 209.

<sup>102</sup> Of the seventeen, six were recaptured. Report 14734, February 29, 1915. Memorandums and Telegrams Relating to Disturbances at Singapore.

opened the gates. Two of the German prisoners, Mr. Hageman and Mr. Hanke, testified independently that, upon entering the camp, the sepoys went directly to the building in which the *Emden* crew was quartered and began shaking hands with them.<sup>103</sup> Clearly, the sepoys knew exactly where they were going and with whom they wanted to communicate in the camp. Hageman and Hanke also reported that, upon being liberated, the crews of the *Emden* and the *Markomannia* were ordered to form up, and that August Diehn of Behn, Meyer, and Company ordered the entire camp of Germans to be ready to march to Singapore at 7:00 a.m. the next morning.<sup>104</sup> According to both men, the rumor in camp was that German warships were waiting in the harbor to collect the prisoners and the mutineers and that the sepoys had taken all the forts.<sup>105</sup> As it turned out, of course, there were no German ships, and the sepoys were not in control of the island. Most of the German prisoners ended up staying where they were. Not a single German helped the sepoys. Instead, seventeen prisoners armed themselves and stole away, and eleven of them escaped to freedom while nearly all the sepoys were captured or surrendered and then punished severely.

It might be tempting to see the escaped Germans as mere opportunists, who took advantage of a moment of confusion to find their way off the island. But there was more to the situation than simple opportunism. First, it is worth remembering that German war aims to foment discontent among colonial peoples and troops around the world were widely known in German military and official circles. We know that August Diehn was interned because the British believed he had been instrumental in provisioning the *Emden*. Diehn's activism in anti-British schemes quickly appeared vindicated when he was later sought – along with two German brothers in the Dutch East Indies – as a key player in an operation smuggling weapons and propaganda to India.<sup>106</sup> And Lauterbach, the commander of the *Emden*, was only too happy to recount in his memoir how he had encouraged the sepoys to see Germans as allies during his internment at Tanglin.<sup>107</sup> Second, we know that some German prisoners had already tried, and succeeded, in influencing the Malay

<sup>103</sup> Testimony of Hageman and testimony of Hanke. Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 197, 205.

<sup>104</sup> Testimony of Hageman and testimony of Hanke. Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 198–99, 207.

<sup>105</sup> Testimony of Hageman and testimony of Hanke. Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 198, 209.

<sup>106</sup> van Dijk, *The Netherlands Indies and the Great War 1914–1918*, 329. We will hear more about these schemes later. In August 1915, Brigadier General Ridout said that it had “just come to light” that Diehn was in fact a leader in a scheme to bring revolution to India. Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 699.

<sup>107</sup> Julius Lauterbach, *£1000 Belooning Dood of Levend: Avontuurlijke Vlucht door de Hollandische Kolonien van den Voormaligen Prijs-officier van de ‘Emden’* (Amsterdam and Rotterdam: Van Langenhusen, 1918), 20.

States Guides in this same way. As a result, it seems reasonable to believe they would renew their efforts with a different group of sepoy. Third, and somewhat startlingly, Brigadier General Ridout himself acknowledged that German prisoners were attempting to influence the men of the 5th prior to the mutiny. As he reported to the court of inquiry, “there is no doubt that the 5th Light Infantry had come to think that the Germans were Mahommedans. It came to my notice about the middle of January 1915, that the German Prisoners were beginning to talk “at” the native sentries – were in the habit of saying prayers at sundown in Mahommedan fashion, and pretended to recite the Koran.”<sup>108</sup> Fourth, we know that at least some of the German prisoners, Diehn and Lauterbach among them, wanted to escape the camp, and had been in the midst of digging a tunnel for that reason when the 5th liberated them.<sup>109</sup> By encouraging the men of the 5th to see them as allies with common grievances against the British, they were leaving the way open for another potential path to freedom.

Did some of the German prisoners promise help from German warships if the 5th were to rebel against the British? Sepoy Nizam Ali, one of the men posted at Tanglin, testified that while he himself had not spoken with the Germans, a fellow guard – sepoy Ali Ulla – said the “Germans told him that if he would release them, in a couple of hours they would get a German ship here to take them all away.”<sup>110</sup> Whether they said this or not, it seems clear that at least a few of the men who were posted for this duty became friendly with some of the prisoners. A number of sepoy testified that certain men – Taj Mohammed in particular – had spent a lot of time in the German quarters, and then had long meetings with Chiste Khan and other sepoy later implicated in the mutiny.<sup>111</sup> Taj Mohammed’s presence was confirmed by German witnesses themselves, one of whom – Hanke – testified that prior to the mutiny Mohammed had saluted a portrait of the Kaiser that he was painting. When questioned by Hanke, Mohammed was supposed to have said, “He is my king.”<sup>112</sup>

Given the evidence, it seems probable that many men of the 5th had already been exposed to both people and propaganda that encouraged strong pan-Islamic, pro-German, and anti-British discontent in the regiment by the time they were posted to guard the German prisoners at Tanglin. When the 5th began their duties, some of the prisoners – already

<sup>108</sup> Report from Brigadier General Ridout on Proceedings of the Court of Inquiry. Sareen, *Secret Documents on Singapore Mutiny 1915*, 699.

<sup>109</sup> van Dijk, *The Netherlands Indies and the Great War 1914–1918*, 323.

<sup>110</sup> Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 109.

<sup>111</sup> For example, the testimony of Lance Naik Maksud and Sepoy Nizam Ali. Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 79, 109.

<sup>112</sup> Testimony of G.R. Hanke. Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 210.

experienced at encouraging dissatisfaction among the Guides – made a point of deepening that discontent, and of demonstrating their common grievances with the sepoys. Some of the guards may genuinely have believed that the Germans would call in warships if they were to mutiny, or at least that they would take up arms and help secure the island. Their hopes in this direction may explain why they liberated Tanglin first. Perhaps, too, the failure of the Germans to join them or help in any way may explain the subsequent lack of direction displayed by many of the sepoys just hours after the mutiny began.

Thus, instead of seeing the mutiny as a spontaneous affair with no clear leaders as some have done, I would argue instead that its causes can be clearly traced to the revolutionary influences to which the sepoys had been exposed since their arrival in Singapore.<sup>113</sup> These influences hailed from myriad channels, many with origins as far afield as North America, Germany, Britain, the Ottoman Empire, and India. The discontent produced by these influences was sharpened by contact with the German prisoners, who had clear reasons for egging them on, and who may have promised help in the event of mutiny. The situation was volatile.

Let us fast-forward now to the days just prior to the mutiny. On January 27, 1915, the commander of the regiment – Colonel Martin – was notified that the 5th were being transferred from Singapore to Hong Kong.<sup>114</sup> Hong Kong was not a combat post, and the 5th would be performing there the same kinds of garrison duty they already performed in Singapore. But the news was not welcomed by some of the Indian officers in the regiment. In response to the news, men like Chiste Khan, Dundee Khan, Abdul Ali, Taj Mohammed, Imtiaz Ali and others began to tell their fellow soldiers disquieting stories about the upcoming transfer. Some soldiers testified they had been told that because of certain German victory in the war, the British no longer needed sepoys, and that their ship would be intentionally sunk at sea. As Lance Naik Maksud, D company, testified, “They . . . said that as Germany was making so much progress the British would have no use for them and would send them away in a ship and sink them.”<sup>115</sup> Other soldiers reported learning that even though the regiment was being transferred to Hong Kong initially, it would then be sent to the front.<sup>116</sup> Still others were led to believe that

<sup>113</sup> Karen Snow is among these. See Snow, “Russia and the 1915 Indian Mutiny in Singapore.”

<sup>114</sup> Harper and Miller, *Singapore Mutiny*, 31. <sup>115</sup> Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 79.

<sup>116</sup> A number of letters intercepted by the censor indicated this sentiment, including Shaikh Mohammed Ali, No. 2 Company, who wrote that the regiment “will go to Hong Kong. But don’t know this, whether it is going to the war.” Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 729.

the regiment was not going to Hong Kong at all, but that it was going straight to Europe or to Egypt.<sup>117</sup>

All of the intercepted letters registered concern and, often, confusion about the destination of the 5th. Lance Naik Najaf Khan and Munshi Khan wrote their brother that “the other news is that our Regiment is going to the war. . . . (We) will either go to Europe, France, or Africa. (We) don’t know to which country we will go. Will embark the ship on the 18th. . . . And we know it by our sense that we will go to Europe.”<sup>118</sup> Zaboora Ali Khan wrote, “And we cannot write any more letters now, as on the February 18th we will proceed to the war,” and was echoed by Ghafoor and Nazir Khan who wrote, “We will go to Europe to war.”<sup>119</sup> An unnamed sepoy wrote his father that he knew “we are being taken to Hong Kong from here,” but followed by saying “God knows further where they are taking [us?] to.”<sup>120</sup> Most dramatic was the letter written by Shaikh Mohammed Ali, who said “It is with sighing, crying, grief and sorrow to tell you that the transfer of the regiment on the February 20th is now a settled fact. It will go to Hong Kong. But don’t know this, whether it is going to the war . . . . We are very much confused and shocked. All the regiment is in sorrow altogether.”<sup>121</sup>

Widespread fears that the regiment was not going where the regimental commanders had promised were not, in fact, far-fetched. The men of the 5th knew that the King’s Own Yorkshire regiment – which had been sent to the front at the start of the war – was originally told that it was being sent to India. As Arthur Young himself wrote, “the battalion believed it was going to Egypt, not to Hong Kong, in the same way as the King’s Own Yorkshire Light Infantry when embarked went to Europe not, as anticipated/believed, India.”<sup>122</sup> Given everything else the men had heard about German power, the untrustworthiness of the British, and the possibility of being forced to fight other Muslims over the last few months, such stories must have been particularly alarming. In the version where the regiment would be sunk at sea, the scenario was one of extreme British duplicity that would result in the death of everyone on board. In the version where the regiment would be sent to the front, death would take more time but was equally sure. In order to discourage relatives at home from enlisting, Ghafoor and Nazir Khan wrote, “In

<sup>117</sup> For Europe, letter from Lance Naik Najaf Khan and Munshi Khan. For Egypt, testimony of Lance Naik Maksud. Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 718, 83.

<sup>118</sup> Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 718–19. <sup>119</sup> Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 726, 722.

<sup>120</sup> Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 724. Rahim Dad Khan also voiced the same suspicions, 720.

<sup>121</sup> Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 729.

<sup>122</sup> Report 9891, March 1. Memorandums and Telegrams Relating to Disturbances at Singapore.



one day alone sometimes two thousands, sometimes twenty thousands and sometimes one hundred thousand, no day passes without events, so many people perish. . . . No trusting in the employment.”<sup>123</sup> Finally, in the version where sepoy would be sent to Egypt, the men faced the specter of having to fight against other Muslims when they arrived.

These rumors soon came to the attention of Major William Cotton, second in command of the 5th. In his testimony to the court of inquiry, Cotton admitted that a Muslim *moulvi* (a Muslim doctor of the law) who was returning to India had come to say goodbye just a few days before the mutiny. The *moulvi* told Cotton that a sepoy in the 5th had said that another *moulvi* was telling the men “not to go and fight against the Turks,” and also that Chiste Khan “was lecturing every morning to the men to the same effect.”<sup>124</sup> Cotton was not convinced of the reliability of this report. He did, however, discuss it with Colonel Martin, who declared that he would inquire into the matter once the men had reached Hong Kong. In the meantime, Cotton was made aware by some of the Indian officers that rumors were circulating that the regiment was not going to Hong Kong. To dispel these, Cotton gathered the Indian officers under his command and showed them a telegram from Hong Kong advising the regiment of its housing situation.<sup>125</sup>

These efforts, however, did not deter the main instigators. It is impossible to know whether or not men like Chiste Khan truly believed they were being sent to the front (or drowned, or to Egypt), or if they used a plausible story to inspire other men to join them in their already well-developed desire to rebel. Whatever the case, upon learning of their transfer to Hong Kong, at least some men of the 5th decided they were not going. Lance Naik Maksud, “B” company, testified that on February 14 Dunde Khan and Abdul Ali had said, “we intend to raise a disturbance and we have no intention of going on service.”<sup>126</sup> Whether or not the men did in fact say something to that effect, we do know that they did play critical roles in the mutiny that occurred the very next day. On the 14th, it is possible that the instigators still believed they had a few days to plan, because the original transfer day had been scheduled for February 18. However, the ship arrived early, and the departure date was set for the 16th. Time was short.

On the morning of the 15th, the regiment assembled for a final inspection by Brigadier General Ridout. His speech had been given to Colonel

<sup>123</sup> Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 722. Also Najaf Khan, who said, “No one has escaped who has gone to the war. All have perished,” 720.

<sup>124</sup> Testimony of Major W.L. Cotton, 5th Light Infantry. Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 383.

<sup>125</sup> Major Cotton. Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 384.

<sup>126</sup> Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 82.

Martin the day before, so that it could be translated for the men. After Ridout complimented the regiment on their good service in Singapore, the men heard the following translation:

In saying goodbye to the regiment [the general] would remind them that though it is not their good fortune to go to EUROPE, they are going where there is need of their services. It is the duty of all of us to go where we are ordered, no matter what our own feelings are. The Empire is vast and the duty of guarding it great. At the same time he hopes that it may soon be their luck to go to EUROPE and fight side by side with the Indian troops against our powerful enemy.<sup>127</sup>

Although the general had clearly stated that the regiment was not going to Europe, at the same time he did not specifically say that they were going to Hong Kong. Given the tense state of the regiment, such vagueness did not reassure the men whose loyalties had been tested from so many quarters for the past several months. Thus when the first shot was fired later that afternoon, it was a local expression of a truly global set of pressures.

### **The Official Version**

That is not how the British authorities decided to explain the mutiny, at least publicly. An official version of events – produced by the court of inquiry – in fact did devote attention to all of the causes explored above, although its conclusions were somewhat different. The report itself was completed and submitted on May 20, 1915, exactly two months from the day the court first began its investigations. In its conclusions regarding the causes of the mutiny, the report maintained that it owed its origins to a set of “primary” and a set of “contributory” factors. First among the primary causes, it insisted, was serious tension between the regiment’s British commanding officers – particularly between Colonel Martin and two of the British captains – the net result of which undermined discipline. Second, the report cited disagreements and dissension between the Indian officers and men in the regiment’s mutinous right wing, particularly between Subedar Dunde Khan and Jemadars Chiste Khan and Abdul Ali on the one hand, and two other Subedars on the other. In fact, the evidence indicates that both problems did indeed exist within the regiment. Colonel Martin’s British officers believed him to be an ineffective leader who had the tendency to say things in front of sepoys that undermined their own authority, while the disagreements between the

<sup>127</sup> Copy of Regimental Order no. 100 d. Report on Singapore Disturbances, Part II, WO 32/9560, 103.

Indian officers had apparently been going on for years.<sup>128</sup> In the view of the court of inquiry, this poor state of discipline is what allowed various “seditious” influences to find such a “ready and fertile field” in the regiment in the first place, and thus must be considered the most important causes of the mutiny.<sup>129</sup>

But the official report did take other causes seriously, even though it demoted them to mere “contributory” causes. Of these, the report cited “outside influences” from seditious elements filtering through Singapore, the poisonous influence of the Indian merchant, Kasim Mansur, who preached “fanatical unrest” among the troops, the influence of German POWs, the seditious work of a few Indian officers and men (including those whose execution was recorded at the start of this essay), and jealousies over promotions among the men.<sup>130</sup> Of particular note, among these “contributory” causes, was the court’s acknowledgment of Ghadar activism in the region:

The town and settlement of Singapore, together with the neighboring states, enjoy a widespread and unenviable notoriety as being a focus for Indian seditious passing to and from the Far East and America. It is also well known to harbour many rank seditious of Indian nationality amongst its residents.<sup>131</sup>

Included among these “rank seditious” were both Kasim Mansur and Nur Alam Shah, the latter of whom had specifically “incited sepoys to rise against the British, telling them that a German warship was about to arrive at Singapore.” To make matters worse, the report continued, “we have evidence, fragmentary it is true, but circumstantial, of collusion with the German prisoners of war” at Tanglin.<sup>132</sup>

Perhaps not surprisingly, the conclusions of the court of inquiry were hardly unbiased. Its three members were all British men whose careers were vested either in Singapore or in the Indian Army, and thus none were likely to have sympathy with the sepoys’ cause.<sup>133</sup> In addition, while the court was in session more than two hundred sepoys were executed, exiled,

<sup>128</sup> Proceedings of Court of Inquiry. Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 36–37.

<sup>129</sup> Proceedings of Court of Inquiry. Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 38.

<sup>130</sup> Proceedings of Court of Inquiry. Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 39.

<sup>131</sup> Report in Connection with Mutiny, IOR, L/MIL/17/19/48, 8.

<sup>132</sup> Proceedings of Court of Inquiry. Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 40.

<sup>133</sup> The three members were Brigadier-General F.A. Hoghton, president, sent from India; Lieutenant-Colonel Ferguson, Royal Artillery Medical Corps; and Mr. Chancellor, Inspector-General of the Police, Straits Settlements. Two other prominent Singapore Britons, a lawyer and a banker, had served on the committee prior to Hoghton’s arrival from India.

or imprisoned – a factor that almost certainly hindered the collection of honest testimony by the sepoys it interviewed.<sup>134</sup>

As imperfect as the final report may have been, it was nevertheless far more balanced than the public explanations offered by the British metropolitan government and the government of Singapore in the immediate aftermath of the mutiny. In fact, the final report from the court of inquiry was never publicly released, which gave British authorities the opportunity to “spin” the event for their own purposes. The public explanation of the mutiny, therefore, was significantly different from the version reconstructed by the court of inquiry. Most importantly, the public version denied the importance of external causes and instead held that the Singapore mutiny had been a strictly local affair caused by lack of discipline in the regiment. This was the intentional result of furious collaboration between authorities in Singapore and London in the days immediately following the mutiny, in which each word of the official communiqué was scrutinized for its impact.<sup>135</sup> The official press release given to Reuters thirteen days afterwards read:

Owing to jealousy about recent promotions, a portion of the 5th Light Infantry (late 5th Bengals) at Singapore refused to obey orders, causing a serious riot. This was quelled by the local forces assisted by British and Allied ships. The casualties were – Killed: six officers, fourteen British soldiers and fourteen civilians. Wounded: nine British soldiers. Some of the rioters were killed, and a large number surrendered and were captured. There has been no destruction of property. All is now quiet.<sup>136</sup>

One thing that stands out in this public press release is that the event was reduced from a mutiny to a “serious riot.” More importantly, its global origins were completely erased, and instead were ascribed to “jealousy about recent promotions.” In spite of the complex, international networks that influenced the men of the 5th to take the dramatic decision to mutiny, their actions – for which many paid with their lives – were reduced to petty infighting. In the hopes that this version of events would eventually prevail, the government of Singapore maintained tight censorship over newspapers and letters to and from the island.<sup>137</sup> And because the report of the court of inquiry was never made public and was only declassified

<sup>134</sup> Court Martial Proceedings on Mutineers of the 5th Light Infantry, 1915. India Office Records, (IOR) L/MII/7/7191, Vol. II. Letter from Dudley Ridout, General Commanding the Troops in Singapore, August 26, 1915.

<sup>135</sup> See Reports 8188, 19 February; 8189, 19 February; 8577, 22 February; 8578, 22 February, in Memorandums and Telegrams Relating to Disturbances at Singapore.

<sup>136</sup> Press Bureau Account of the Emeute, February 28, 1915. Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 828.

<sup>137</sup> An internal memo from the Governor of the Straits Settlements, Sir Arthur Young, indicated that “. . . instructions were issued to the Censor on the 16th instant that

in 1965, the official version of the mutiny as a purely local affair has cast a long shadow over later interpretations.

### Conclusion

British insistence, at least in public, that the mutiny was caused solely by local conditions flatly contradicted not only the evidence but also what many authorities – including Arthur Young himself – said in private and official reports. Part of the motivation for making light of the situation was surely to avoid censure for fostering an environment of international sedition and lax discipline. Young had in fact responded to the court of inquiry's castigation of Singapore as a site with a notorious reputation for sedition by countering, "I will only say that this reputation was unknown to the Government of the Straits Settlements and to the Government of the Malay States, and that no communication on the subject was ever received from the Government of India . . . or from any Government or from any person."<sup>138</sup> Given the strong evidence that Young and the General Commanding the Troops were aware of these problems at least since the first publication of *Ghadar* in 1913, this statement seems disingenuous and self-serving at best.

But public explanations of the mutiny as a local affair were allowed to go unopposed by other authorities who knew better, including the Government of India and the court of inquiry itself. This was because British authorities were desperate to maintain a façade of confidence in the face of what they believed to be a coordinated conspiracy by the Central Powers and their sympathizers to undermine colonial rule. They feared emphasizing the external causes of the mutiny would only fuel discontent among other Indian regiments and Indian civilians both in India and abroad, as well as among colonized populations elsewhere.<sup>139</sup> For all of these reasons, British authorities were keen to avoid adding fuel to the fire of discontent, and especially to avoid publicizing an event that could inspire emulation elsewhere.

no papers were to be permitted to leave for abroad, and that letters except for the United Kingdom were to be censored." Arthur Young to Government House, February 25, 1915. Report on Singapore Disturbances Part Two, WO 32/9560, The National Archives, London.

<sup>138</sup> Sareen, *Secret Documents*, 710.

<sup>139</sup> Of special concern to British authorities were the Indian regiments stationed in places such as Hong Kong and Burma. They were also highly conscious of how Chinese populations in China and Southeast Asia might regard the mutiny. For concerns about Chinese populations, see Ching-hwang, *The Chinese in Southeast Asia and Beyond*, 191–204; Leo Suryadinata, "Overseas Chinese" and Southeast Asia in Chinese Foreign Policy: An Interpretive Essay (Research Notes and Discussion Paper No. 11: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1978), 9.

When viewed in the larger context of German–Indian–Turkish intrigue in World War I Southeast Asia, the mutiny was only a dramatic episode in a much larger story that endured for the rest of the war. Such intrigue was a constant feature in the communications of not only the British in Malaya but also the French in Indochina. British and French authorities believed those responsible for anti-Allied plots had found safe havens in nearby neutral territories – especially the Dutch East Indies, Siam, China, and the Philippines – and that they were using these havens to wreak havoc on Malaya, Indochina, Hong Kong, the Chinese Concessions, and India. After the mutiny of the 5th, British authorities were well aware that the suppression of the mutiny did not eliminate the problem of anti-Allied sedition in the region. By insisting on the purely local origins of the mutiny, they hoped to be able to stem its progress. In the meantime, they did not waste time martialing the help of their wartime allies in what they hoped would be a massive demonstration of power – and it is to that we now turn.