CHAPTER XII

The German menace

During the Russo-Japanese War, the Netherlands Indies had run the risk of becoming a base of operations for one of the belligerents. The same happened, albeit somewhat differently, in the initial years of the Great War. Berlin did all it could to exploit its alliance with Turkey. One of the results was the combined effort of the German government and Indian revolutionaries to subvert colonial rule in the British colonies and protectorates. The scheme had its origin in San Francisco with the Ghadr (Mutiny) movement. The Ghadr movement had been founded in 1913 by an Indian exile, Har Dayal, a twenty-three-year-old former Oxford student. Its name recalled the Indian Mutiny of 1857 and explained the aims of the movement. Members fanned out over the world from the United States to accomplish what Ghadr stood for. Before the war, Indian refugees in San Francisco had already put out feelers to find out whether Berlin was prepared to support an insurrection in British India with weapons and money once war between Germany and Great Britain had been declared. The initiative had come from Har Dayal. Berlin responded positively. Both the Kaiser and General H.J.L. von Moltke, the chief of the German General Staff at the beginning of the war, had no difficulty imagining what could be accomplished by inciting Muslims in India and the Near East to rise up against Great Britain once Great Britain and Germany were at war (Ferguson 2001:213).

In Chicago, Los Angeles, Washington, New York and other American cities, German diplomats, other German citizens, and people of German descent started to cooperate with Indians to plan an uprising in the British colonies. Soon after the first contacts had been made Har Dayal was arrested by the American authorities. He broke bail and fled to Switzerland, then the refuge of all kinds of agitators from all over the world (Hopkirk 1994:48-50). Geneva was the home of the Club of Egyptian Patriots, a group of anti-British Egyptians meeting once a week in the house of Rifat. Others were active in Zurich. Here a group styling itself Pro India, which had chosen ‘India without the English, India for the Hindus’ as its motto, had been founded in 1912. Its members included E.F.E. Douwes Dekker’s old acquaintances Walter Strickland and Shiyamaji Krishnavarma. Pro India published a magazine under the same name.
The idea of hurting Great Britain, France, and Russia by instigating unrest among their Muslim and Hindu subjects gained new momentum after July 1914. The scheme was enthusiastically supported by the Kaiser and Von Moltke. No time was lost effectuating a plan. The combined force of anti-colonial propaganda, calls for a holy war, feelings of religious solidarity, and agitation by agents recruited by the Germano-Indian conspiracy was a powerful factor in undermining British rule. After Turkey had entered the war it assumed even greater proportions. Coupled with rumours about Allied setbacks in Europe and the reports of the enormous number of soldiers who died on the battlefields, the Germano-Indian plot created plenty of unrest in British colonies. France was also not spared the effects of the anti-Allied propaganda. In Madagascar people inspired by ‘fallacious literature’ tried to poison the officers and non-commissioned officers of the French troops stationed in the island. They failed.  

With the Ottoman Empire as its enemy Great Britain had to exercise great prudence in employing Indian and other Asian soldiers abroad. Anti-British propaganda made the task all the more urgent. Revolutionary Indians set out to foment unrest among Indian soldiers specifically and among the Indian population at large. Rebellion was the ultimate aim. In Asia Ghadr agents targeted Indian units in India, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Burma, Penang, and Singapore (Sareen 1995:10). In France and Belgium the British Army had to be on its guard against activities of agitators intent on dissuading Indian soldiers from fighting against Germany.

In India and the Malay peninsula some of the Muslims soldiers were already reluctant to fight the Turkish army. If given a choice, they would have preferred to fight on the side of the sultan, the symbol of their religion. As a consequence the loyalty of a number of Muslim units could not be trusted. The officers commanding the Indian troops were well aware of this. They distributed their own translations of the statement by the British government published in the Gazette of India, underlined the British position in speeches to the troops and in private conversations with Indian officers, and gave their troops numerous assurances that the war had nothing to do with religion (Sareen 1995:286, 496, 579).

At a higher level, army command made assiduous efforts to ensure that units known for the strong Islamic disposition of their soldiers were not ordered to battlefields where they might have to fight Turkish troops close to the holy places of Islam (Smurthwaite 1997:165-6). Special care was taken with regiments recruited among the Muslim frontier tribes. The Viceroy of British India, Lord Charles Hardinge, reported to London that these troops were ‘so

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1 De Locomotief, 21-2-1916.