

JOUHS Colloquium 2009
14 March 2009, Balliol College, Oxford

Odd Alliances

The Odd at Odds: British Spies and US Attorneys versus a Conspiracy of German Junkers,
Indian Revolutionaries, and Irish Republicans during WWI¹

Matthew E. Plowman, Ph.D.
Grand View University

Abstract of Presentation

In the early years of WWI, the US Attorney's office in San Francisco prosecuted both the British and German consulates for violations of America's neutrality laws. The German consulate illegally supplied the *SMS Leipzig* off the coast, while the British consulate illegally recruited volunteers for the British Army. Yet, a subsequent conspiracy produced a truly odd set of alliances when these Germans joined Sinn Féin operatives and Catholic priests along with Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, and Communist revolutionaries in the Hindustani Gadar Party to send guns to India for a revolt against the Raj.

The conspiracy failed when two ships failed to rendezvous off the coast of Mexico. The British consulate, earlier fined for violating neutrality laws, now assisted the US Attorneys by supplying witnesses from India and sending British agents to accompany American federal agents on raids. British agents led interrogations and even sat beside the US Attorneys during trial. The trial, which was the longest and most expensive in US history at the time, ended with the Hindu leader of the Gadar shot dead in the courtroom by a Sikh. The German consulate staff, most of the Gadar leaders, and Sinn Féin operative Larry de Lacey spent most of the war in prison.

This paper explores the ironies and *Realpolitik* of a democratic America supporting Britain's imperial containment of Irish and Indian republicanism while trying to avert German espionage, sabotage, and intrigue. There is an element of humor and hypocrisy in America allying with its own former colonial master against others who wished to follow its path of independence; just as it is odd that aristocrats of the Kaiser's government colluded with leftwing Irish and Indian revolutionaries bent on overthrowing monarchy. There is a larger lesson about the fluidity and pragmatism of nationalism and global war that speaks to the 21st century.

¹ Research for this paper was done in the US Attorney's Records at the National Archives in San Bruno, California, the Gadar Party Collection at the South-Southeast Asian Library at the University of California-Berkeley, several collections at the Hoover Institute of War and Revolution at Stanford University, as well as documents of the Security Service and Foreign Office at the National Archives-Public Records Office (TNA-PRO) in London.