

The Khaksar Martyrs of March 19, 1940

By Nasim Yousaf

On March 19, 1940, police in Lahore opened fire on the Khaksars, killing a number of them and wounding many others. Five days later, the All-India Muslim League passed the Pakistan and Khaksar Resolutions during its historic session in Lahore. As we mark the 67th anniversary of the March 19th massacre, it is important to take a look back at the events that led up to the shooting — they leave no doubt that the Khaksars who gave their lives on that fateful day in 1940 were no less than martyrs who made the ultimate sacrifice for their nation.

There were a number of reasons for the clash on March 19th. During the late 1930s, the Khaksar Tehrik had emerged as an incredibly powerful organization in the Indian subcontinent. Its strength was revealed in 1939 during a clash with the Government of U.P. over the Sunni-Shia riots in Lucknow (U.P.). Fearing the Tehrik's growing popularity, anti-Khaksar elements attempted to suppress the Movement. Punjab Premier Sir Sikandar Hayat Khan (also member of the Working Committee of the All-India Muslim League) who opposed the Khaksars, with the support of the anti-Khaksar elements, took the first step towards banning the Khaksar Tehrik. On February 22, 1940, Punjab police raided Mohammadi Steam Press (printer of the Khaksar weekly, *Al-Islah*) in Lahore and confiscated copies of the *Al-Islah* along with printed Khaksar materials and pamphlets. Within a few days of this raid (on February 28, 1940), the Punjab Government issued a Press Communique (under the Defense of India Rules), according to which Khaksar activities were banned.

Allama Mashriqi, the founder and leader of the Khaksar Movement, was stunned by the Government's order. He felt that the Khaksars had done nothing wrong, as they had not engaged in any violent activity or broken any laws. Thus, he launched immediate efforts — including meeting with Quaid-e-Azam and other prominent leaders — in an attempt to get the ban removed. According to Syed Shabbir Hussain's (a veteran journalist) book, *Al-Mashriqi: The Disowned Genius*, Quaid-e-Azam told Mashriqi "I wish Sikandar could be my man. If it had been so I would have ordered him." Fatima Jinnah (Mr. Jinnah's sister), also present at the meeting, supported Mr. Jinnah and agreed that "Sikandar is not our man."

Despite Mashriqi's efforts, however, the ban remained intact. On March 19, 1940, a contingent of 313 Khaksars (from Punjab, Frontier and other provinces), dressed in military-style uniform with belchas (spades) on their shoulders, came out on the streets of Lahore. They began a peaceful protest march towards Badshahi Mosque, where they were to offer prayers. The Superintendent of Police, D. Gainsford (accompanied by Beaty [Deputy Superintendent of Police], F.C. Bourne [District Magistrate], and a City Magistrate) also arrived at the site. Equipped with guns, pistols, batons, and shields, they intercepted the Khaksars and ordered them to stop the march, but the Khaksars continued. Gainsford presumably couldn't bear to be ignored. According to well-known journalist Muhammad Saeed's book, *Lahore: A Memoir*, Gainsford "slapped Inayat Shah [a Khaksar] in the face." The situation quickly escalated and resulted in a serious clash between the police and the Khaksars. The police began indiscriminately firing on the defenseless Khaksars; it would not be wrong to state that this was a

battle of guns versus spades, with the police firing bullets and the Khaksars defending themselves with spades.

The police's arbitrary and ruthless firing continued for a considerable length of time. Many Khaksars lost their lives while a number of others were seriously injured. Khaksar bodies littered the streets, surrounded by pools of blood. Those who witnessed the tragic scene say that the gallantry shown by the Khaksars was unbelievable. According to K.L. Gauba (then Member of the Punjab Legislative Assembly) in his book *Friends and Foes*, 200 Khaksars were killed (though the Government version only declared 32 killed).

Immediately after the massacre, the Khaksar headquarters (adjacent to Mashriqi's house) were raided by police and army soldiers. The police fired tear gas grenades in order to make arrests. Furthermore, Ehsanullah Khan Aslam (Mashriqi's son), who was on the premises at the time, was seriously injured (he later succumbed to the injury and died on May 31, 1940). Police also arrested Mashriqi's sons and the Khaksars present at the site. Mashriqi, who was in Delhi at the time, was arrested as well.

Following the events of March 19th, the city of Lahore was essentially operating under emergency laws; the Government imposed a curfew, censored the news, and banned public processions and speeches. Shops were closed and Section 144, which prohibited the gathering of five or more persons in any street, lane, or public place (within the limits of the Lahore Municipality) was enforced. There was to be no mention of the Khaksar Tehrik; the dead Khaksars were not to be remembered as martyrs or the living as heroes. Meanwhile, police and intelligence agencies continued chasing the Khaksars and a large number of them were thrown in prison and kept in miserable conditions.

News of Mashriqi's arrest and the Khaksar killings spread like wildfire and sent shockwaves through British India. However, the All-India Muslim League (AIML) session scheduled for March 22-24, 1940 was not postponed. In fact, Sir Sikandar Hayat Khan (Punjab Premier) removed Section 144 in order for the Muslim League to hold its session. The session thus began just three days after the brutal massacre of the Khaksars; this gathering would prove to be a historic one.

On March 22, the Muslim League session started in Lahore with Sir Sikandar Hayat Khan and other leaders in attendance. At the venue, large crowds — outraged by the brutal massacre of the Khaksars just a few days earlier — were present in order to seek redress for their grievances. Sir Sikandar and others made desperate efforts to prevent discussion of the Khaksar issue at the session. However, the angry and emotionally charged public at the site ignored Sikandar's wishes and highly condemned the Punjab Government. They shouted slogans against the Punjab Premier and Government and passionately supported Mashriqi and the Khaksars. Chants such as "Mashriqi Zindabad" (long live Mashriqi), "Khaksar Zindabad," and "Remove the ban on the Khaksar Tehrik" were raised. The people demanded an inquiry into the March 19th incident (and compensation for murdered and injured Khaksars), the release of Mashriqi and the Khaksars, and lifting of the ban on the Khaksar Movement. They also pushed for the removal of Sir Sikandar from the Muslim League. The fervent appeals and chants of the people continued for the duration of the three-day session. To avoid any untoward incident, Quaid-e-Azam, Liaquat Ali Khan, Nawab Bahadur Yar Jung (also a Khaksar), and other AIML leaders had to speak to the public at various occasions.

Finally, owing to the public pressure, the AIML passed the Khaksar Resolution side by side with the Pakistan Resolution on the last night of the session (both resolutions were passed on March 24, 1940 and not on March 23, as is the common belief).

It is important to note that prior to this session, Section 144 was in place and the public could not gather on the streets to show their support for the Khaksars. When this restriction was lifted for the AIML session, people took this opportunity and rushed to the session to express their heartfelt sentiment towards the Khaksar massacre. The atmosphere remained extremely tense throughout the entire three-day session. Unfortunately, the public's support for the Khaksars during this three day session has been either ignored, twisted, or inadequately incorporated in the history books of the Indian sub-continent for political reasons.

Although the March 19th massacre was a major turning point for independence, the Khaksar struggle did not end there. The events that unfolded following this incident tell the story of the longest, toughest, and most unparalleled fight against British rule in the Indian subcontinent.

There is no doubt that the Khaksar tragedy on March 19th united the nation and set the stage for freedom. Unfortunately, due to political implications and the controversial nature of the subject, the Khaksar Tehrik's role is not discussed much in India or Pakistan. Furthermore, despite their long struggle, some do not even consider the Khaksars who died on March 19th to be martyrs. It is time that we rose above political controversies and corrected history by acknowledging the role of the Khaksars. As evidenced by this article, the story of the Pakistan Resolution would be incomplete without discussing the Khaksar tragedy. The Khaksars sacrificed everything — including their lives — for the sake of bringing freedom to British India. They were determined to remove the nation from the clutches of foreign yoke; they resisted any ban or restriction that obstructed their way. Even when the riddled bodies of dead or injured Khaksars soaked in blood lay on the ground, the Khaksars remained intent on emerging victorious. The Khaksars were neither terrorists nor barbarians or hooligans — they were *true freedom fighters*. Why then should they not be remembered as martyrs and heroes?

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The above article, *The Khaksar Martyrs of March 19, 1940*, appeared in *The Frontier Post* (Pakistan) on March 19, 2007.

The pictures below show reports in the newspaper following the Khaksar Massacre on March 19, 1940 and the arrest of Allama Mashriqi.



Headline: **SERIOUS CLASH BETWEEN KHAKSARS AND POLICE**
The Tribune March 20, 1940



Headline: **ALLAMA MASHRAQI ARRESTED**
The Tribune March 21, 1940