



GREAT MUSLIMS OF THE WEST

Makers of Western Islam

MUHAMMAD MOJLUM KHAN



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This book is dedicated to:

MRS FULESA KHANUM
my mother, for her love and sacrifices.

FAHMIDA KHAN AND MUHAMMAD ABDUL WAHID
for their kindness and encouragement.

ASEFA AND MOHAMMAD ALI QAYYUM
for their support and co-operation.

*May the Islamic world and the West
continue to learn and promote knowledge,
understanding and co-operation
for the benefit of the whole of humanity!*

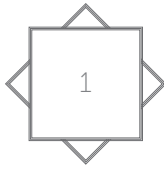


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ABD AL-RAHMAN I

B. 729 – D. 788

SPAIN

Andalus is the Arabic name for Muslim Spain, derived from *bilad al-Andalish* or ‘land of Vandals’, who were eastern Germanic tribesmen that invaded Iberia. There, they established their hegemony until the Visigoths, who were western Germanic nomads, replaced them as rulers of Spain. After the arrival of the Muslims in the beginning of the eighth century, the Umayyad rulers of Andalusia established themselves in Cordova, the capital of Islamic Spain, and consolidated their rule. This rule was destined to continue for nearly three centuries before several other dynasties continued to rule parts of Andalusia for another five centuries, until eventually the Muslims were ousted from the Nasrid kingdom of Granada by Isabella and Ferdinand in 1492.

Abd al-Rahman ibn Mu‘awiyah ibn Hisham ibn Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan ibn Hakam, better known as Abd al-Rahman I, was to be the first Muslim ruler of a European country as the founder of the Umayyad dynasty of Spain in the eighth century. The rule of Abd al-Rahman and his descendants lasted for nearly three centuries, and they became renowned for their patronage of learning, scholarship, arts and architecture in medieval Spain and across the rest of Europe.

Born into the famous Umayyad royal family of Damascus; Abd al-Rahman’s father, Mu‘awiyah (fl. 725–737), was the son of Caliph Hisham (691–743), and his mother Raha, hailed from the Berber tribe of Saba in present-day Morocco. His parents ensured he received a good education during his early years. It was a challenging and difficult period in the history of the Umayyad dynasty (r. 661–750) because their Abbasid rivals (r. 750–1258), encouraged by Umayyad family feuds and political waywardness, were

busy planning their downfall. At the time, the Umayyad dynasty extended all the way from Yemen in the south to Morocco in the west, and from Uzbekistan in the north to the Indus Valley in the east. During the time when Marwan II was assassinated by Abbasid agents, in the summer of 750, young Abd al-Rahman was living in the peaceful surroundings of Zaytun in Aleppo. As the House of Umayyah (*Banu Umayyah*) began to crumble in the face of internal rivalry and external pressure, the ruthless and uncompromising Abbasids went in for the kill, massacring around seventy members of the Umayyad family in the notorious Banquet of Jaffa.¹ This horrific event sent a chill down the spine of young Abd al-Rahman before he bid farewell to the Islamic East and set off in the direction of North Africa (*al-Ifriqiya*) to carve out another remarkable chapter in the history of the Umayyad dynasty: this time in the Islamic West.

Flame-haired, tall and handsome, Prince Abd al-Rahman looked more European in his culture, mannerism and appearance than an Arab.² He was barely 20 when he had reached north-western Africa (or the Maghreb). The journey from Damascus to the Berber tribe of Nafza was, as expected, fraught with danger, uncertainty and suspense. But young Abd al-Rahman was relieved to have reached the ancestral home of his mother in one-piece, unlike his younger brother Yahya, who was captured on the banks of the Euphrates by their Abbasid pursuers and brutally put to death. Having witnessed many horrors, the Umayyad prince was determined not to become a victim himself. Despite repeated Abbasid attempts to assassinate Abd al-Rahman, he escaped unscathed against all odds and lived to tell the tale, much to the disgust and dismay of the former. That is why historians have often referred to him as the ultimate survivor, one who had defied and disrupted destiny, to keep the Umayyad flag flying in the Islamic West for almost 300 years!

After living in exile in North Africa for nearly five years; in 755, while Abd al-Rahman was in his mid-twenties, he, accompanied by his loyal guide and supporter, Badr, reached the Berber tribe of Mughila which was located close to the Moroccan coast. From there, the prince and his aide planned their next move, having closely observed the deteriorating political and economic situation that prevailed in Andalusia at the time. However, it was easy to assess the political situation in North Africa because as the Abbasid's grip on power weakened, the local rulers began to rebel and some even openly asserted their independence, leading to much tension, uncertainty and upheaval.

The governor of Ifriqiya (or North Africa) at the time was Abd al-Rahman ibn Habib al-Fihri (r. 745–755), who was a great-grandson of Uqba ibn Nafi (622–683), the Muslim conqueror of North Africa. He was originally appointed governor by the Umayyads, but after the latter's overthrow in 750, he fell out with the Abbasids, and became an autonomous ruler in all but name. Ibn Habib was initially sympathetic towards the Umayyad prince, but in due course, he became afraid of the latter's growing popularity, thus eventually leading to their fall out. Prince Abd al-Rahman made a lucky escape, only to find the political situation across the Straits in Andalus to be equally

chaotic and confusing. Amir Yusuf ibn Abd al-Rahman al-Fihri (r. 747–756), a member of the Fihrid family of South Arabian (Yemeni) origin, was the de facto ruler of Andalus at the time.

However, Yusuf's authority was challenged by his son-in-law, Sumayl ibn Hatim, who hailed from the North Arabian Qaysi tribe. As the two men fought each other for political supremacy, the Umayyad prince sent Badr, his aide, to go and assess first-hand the political, economic and social conditions and, in the process, he established links with the opponents of Yusuf, including his rebellious son-in-law. This was a shrewd political move because linking up with various dissident groups, who now pledged to support the prince on his arrival there, paved the way for the 'young pretender' to make his move and carve out a unique place for himself in the history of Europe as *Sahib al-Andalus* or the 'Lord of Spain'.³

Prince Abd al-Rahman departed from the North African port of Ghazah having paid a fee to his Berber hosts. Finally on 13 September, 755 the prince set foot on the shores of Almunecar, located between present-day Malaga and Almeria, where he was met by two Umayyad officials; Ubaidullah Abu Uthman and Abdullah ibn Khalid. They not only received prince Abd al-Rahman warmly, but also gifted him with Spanish wines and a beautiful slave-girl. He reportedly turned down both; being a devout Muslim, he avoided alcoholic beverages and, as for the slave girl, his sight was firmly fixed on a much bigger prize: his burning desire to establish an Umayyad rule in Spain.

From his base in the heavily fortified village of Torrox, located between Iznajar and Loja, the prince swiftly made contact with, and won over, senior local Umayyad and Yemenite leaders. In a matter of days, Abd al-Rahman had secured the support of around 20,000 men who were ready to fight for him. As he toured other local towns and villages, his name and fame now began to spread like wildfire, earning the 26 year old prince more support and recognition. The governor of Elvira was then resounding defeat by the forces of Abd al-Rahman which, in turn, forced Amir Yusuf and his son-in-law to enter into negotiations with the former. Keen to win over the increasingly powerful prince, Yusuf offered him many gifts including a large estate in Cordova, his daughter in marriage, 500 gold pieces, expensive costumes and even the governorship of Elvira and Malaga. Unmoved, Abd al-Rahman proceeded to Seville, securing it in March 756 without the spilling of any blood. He achieved this whilst Yusuf and his son-in-law were busy suppressing a serious rebellion in the important commercial city of Zaragoza, located in the north of Andalusia.

Upon his triumphant entry into Seville, Prince Abd al-Rahman met Countess Sara the Goth and became an ardent admirer of her beauty and intelligence. Due to her nobility and high standing in society, her descendants, both Muslims and Christians, subsequently became known as Ibn al-Qutiyyah (son of the Gothic woman) and they continued to live in Seville, Niebla and southern Portugal for many generations. It is worth highlighting here that Mary, the Christian mother of Caliph Abd al-Rahman III

of Spain (891–961), was in fact, a direct descendant of Countess Sara of Seville. So, if history is anything to go by, the life and works of Prince Abd al-Rahman on the one hand, and that of Countess Sara on the other – and that of their descendants – does indeed provide a compelling case for an Islamo-Christian culture and civilisation, whose pioneers were of course the Muslims and Christians of medieval Europe and Andalusia in particular.⁴

After successfully securing Seville, Abd al-Rahman turned his attention towards Cordova (*al-Qurtuba*), the biggest prize of all, but Amir Yusuf was, as expected, ever determined to defend his realm. Soon after receiving news of the Basque uprising in Pamplona, Abd al-Rahman dispatched a contingent of his army to suppress the revolt but unfortunately, they were soundly defeated. This forced Yusuf to turn his full attention to defending Cordova against the forces of Abd al-Rahman. The battle and fight to rule Andalus was now looming on the horizon as the two armies marched towards River Guadalquivir (*Wadi al-Kabir* in Arabic) and encamped on opposite ends of the plains of Musarah, located to the east of Cordova. Abd al-Rahman tried to out-smart his opponent by leaving the camp-fires burning at night as his forces moved into the territory of the enemies. However, Yusuf and his troops remained vigilant, until around 3,500 of his supporters – mainly of Yemenite origin and Umayyad sympathisers – deserted him and joined the enemy camp. This was a real blow for Yusuf, thus shattering the morale and confidence of his remaining troops.

To add to his woes, the waters of the Guadalquivir began to subside and Abd al-Rahman responded by calling a Council of War where he discussed various options with his advisors, before marching into the battlefield on Friday 15 May, 756. Led by the prince himself, the two armies clashed and a fierce battle ensued in which the forces of the former, supported by his Yemenite and Umayyad sympathisers, played a decisive role by tipping the balance in favour of the prince. Seeing his army in disarray, Yusuf and Sumayl fled the battlefield as Abd al-Rahman marched into Cordova virtually unopposed. Keen to avert any form of disorder or rioting, he pacified the disgruntled Yemenite leaders and swiftly won over the other local dissident groups to his side. Yusuf was eventually captured in Toledo, the Visigothic capital, as was Sumayl, who was strangled to death in Cordova's central jail, presumably to put an end to any further rebellions.

After removing his opponents, Abd al-Rahman proclaimed himself *Amir* (leader) of Andalus, although at the time he was only in control of southern Spain, with much of the central and northern provinces (such as Toledo, Zaragoza and Barcelona) being firmly in the hands of supporters of the former ruling family. Keen to take stock and strengthen his powerbase in southern Spain, the new Amir established an efficient and effective political and administrative system, ensuring the safety of his people and vigorously promoting economic activity. This important task occupied him from 756 to 763, until a large Abbasid contingent led by al-Ala ibn Mughith, the Abbasid governor

of North Africa, landed in Andalus in a location close to modern Beja. The Abbasid Caliph, Abu Ja'far al-Mansur, wanted to oust Abd al-Rahman from power and, as such, he authorised al-Ala to lead the expedition. The Amir of Andalus on the other hand, was determined as ever to stay put. Although the Abbasid contingent consisted of 7000 professional and well-equipped troops, Abd al-Rahman went to meet them with only 700 hand-picked infantry. In the ensuing battle, the Abbasids were routed and this resounding victory helped the Amir to consolidate his position further.

During the next quarter of a century, Abd al-Rahman faced many rebellions from various groups; from Arab tribal chiefs to Berber tribes and even his own family members; but he successfully crushed all subversive activities and, in doing so, gradually expanded and strengthened his rule. During this period, he initiated and completed a series of projects, including the construction of the famous Great Mosque of Cordova, whilst also recruiting tens of thousands of Berbers from North Africa to join his army. He also established a functioning political and civil service in order to provide for his people as best he could.

It is also worth highlighting here that Abd al-Rahman became the first European ruler to offer official recognition to his minority subjects, including Jews and Christians. As a result, they played a proactive part in the political, social, economic and cultural life of Andalus and did so without having to dilute or renounce their faith and culture. Thus the credit for initiating a culture of tolerance and co-existence, the Spanish *convivencia*, must go to none other than Abd al-Rahman, who is known in the classical Islamic historical sources as *Sahib al-Andalus* (Lord of Spain), *Saqr Quraysh* (Falcon of the Quraysh), *al-Dhakil* (the Immigrant) and *Saqr al-Andalus* (Falcon of Spain).⁵

On a personal level, Abd al-Rahman was a learned, sagacious and devout Muslim. He was well-versed in the Qur'an, Arabic literature, traditional Islamic sciences and poetry. He fathered twenty children; eleven sons and nine daughters; with several wives of European, Berber and Arab descent. As expected, his children went on to rule Andalusia and their policies and practices, too, reflected their multicultural background, being both European and Muslim. Abd al-Rahman also constructed and patronised many mosques, schools, colleges and cultural institutions, and towards the end of his life, began to oversee the affairs of the Great Mosque of Cordova. Then in 787, he nominated his son, Hisham (757–796), as his *Wali al-Huda* (deputy), thus adding Hisham's name to that of Abd al-Rahman's in the weekly Friday prayer (*Salat al-Jumu'ah*) invocation.⁶ This, of course, was an indication of his choice of Hisham as his political successor.

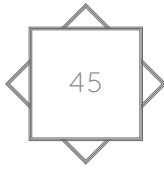
By all accounts, Abd al-Rahman was a great statesman, strategist, military commander and political administrator who single-handedly defied the might of the Abbasids, Charlemagne (d. 814), the Berbers and other factions, in order to establish himself in Spain and rule it for more than thirty years with remarkable tact, wisdom and tremendous success. The founder of Andalus eventually died peacefully in Cordova on 30 September, 788 at the age of 59, but his contributions, achievements and legacy

continue to be a great source of inspiration for Western Muslims to this day. John (Yahya en-Nasr) Parkinson (see chapter 32), a prominent Scottish Muslim writer and poet of the twentieth century, paid Abd al-Rahman this glowing tribute:

*In the time of great en-Nasir, Cordova's enlightened age;
 In the palmy days of Islam, chivalry became the rage.
 And her scions in the tourney sought to win undying fame,
 From the lowest to the highest, prince and chevalier and page.
 And the fairest knew the bravest by the colours that he wore
 And she knew to keep her favour he would desperate battle wage.
 Not alone in camp or tourney, nor in court or courtly grace
 Was the reign of Nasir storied by the poet's heritage;
 Not alone in feats of knighthood or in deeds of bravery,
 Nor in jousts for love and honour did the Moorish lord engage;
 All around the lakes of learning overran the verdured banks
 And the land was full of music and the wisdom of the sage;
 For the sovereign was a scholar, one of nature's noblest sons,
 Literature and science flourished underneath his patronage;
 Every hill and every palace in beloved Andaloos
 Was the meeting place of scholars and of birth and lineage.⁷*



1. T. B. Irving, *The Falcon of Spain: A Study of Eighth Century Spain*.
2. Ibid.
3. Stanley Lane-Poole, *The Muslims in Spain*.
4. Richard W. Bulliet, *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization*.
5. See Ibn al-Athir, *al-Kamil fi Tà'rikh*.
6. Reinhart Dozy, *Spanish Islam: A History of the Muslims in Spain*.
7. Yehya-en-Nasr Parkinson, *Muslim Chivalry*.



NOOR INAYAT KHAN

B. 1914 – D. 1944

UNITED KINGDOM

The First and Second World Wars were, by all accounts, two of the most devastating and destructive conflicts in human history. During the former, it is estimated that there were around 40 million casualties, both military and civilian, whilst in the latter, the total number of human losses rose above 60 million, which was equivalent to three per cent of the world's population in the year 1940. As both wars originated in Europe and were fought between imperialistic, nationalistic and fascist powers – who were, at the time, bent on wreaking havoc not only in Europe, but also around the world – the global powers of the time had no choice but to fight back and defend liberty, freedom and democracy in the face of unspeakable hatred, aggression and injustice.

In the battle between right and wrong, justice and injustice, and freedom and oppression, the champions of liberty and freedom prevailed over the nationalistic forces of darkness and destruction. As the fight against the Serb nationalists (who instigated the First World War) and the Nazis of Germany (who were responsible for the Second World War) were truly decisive battles, people from around the world – regardless of their race, faith and background – actively participated in both wars in order to preserve human dignity and freedom.¹

Whilst the contribution of the prominent Western nations (such as France, Britain, Russia and America) are widely known today, and rightly so; the important role played by other countries (like Canada, Australia, New Zealand, India and South Africa), however, are not as widely recognised. In the same way, the contribution of more than half a million Muslim soldiers during the First World War, and more than a million during the Second World War, is still yet to be recognised. Although the majority of Muslim soldiers who fought for the Allies (especially Britain and France) had hailed from British India and the French colonies of North Africa, others were, in fact, of European or Western origin too. One such extraordinary freedom-fighter was Noor Inayat Khan, who became the first Muslim woman to fight and make the ultimate sacrifice for Britain and France during the Second World War.

For that reason, her life and contribution deserves to be known more widely today, especially at a time when the faith, identity and loyalty of Western Muslims are not only being openly questioned, but also publicly mocked, ridiculed and demonised across Europe and America, due to the same dark forces of nationalism and xenophobia that instigated the First and Second World Wars.

Noor-un-Nisa Inayat Khan, better known as Noor Inayat Khan, was born into a notable Muslim family of Indian origin. Her father, Hazrat Inayat Khan (1882–1927), was from Baroda (today known as Vadodara in the Indian State of Gujarat) and traced his ancestry back to Pashtun Sufis of Afghanistan on the one hand, and the royal family of Tipu Sultan (1750–1799) on the other. Trained in classical Indian music and initiated into a branch of the Chishti Sufi Order of India by Abul Hashim Madani, who was a Shaykh of this branch of Sufism, Inayat Khan soon earned the respect and affection of his spiritual mentor and guide. While he was still in his late twenties, Madani encouraged him to travel to the West to disseminate the message of Islamic spirituality or Sufism.

Being an accomplished musician who specialised in classical Indian music, he travelled across Europe and America and soon established Sufi centres in several Western countries, attracting many followers. It was during this period that he met and married Ora Ray Baker (Ameena Begum). Ora was born in 1892 in New Mexico of half-English and half-Irish parentage, and was an attractive young lady who she first met Inayat Khan in San Francisco. They later married in London in 1913, despite facing opposition from Ora's immediate family.² A year later, Noor Inayat Khan, the eldest of their four children (two daughters and two sons) was born while her father was working as a musician in Moscow. Although Inayat Khan was very fond of Moscow for its cultural richness and vibrancy, the prevailing political tension and uncertainty soon forced him to move to France.

In the meantime, the First World War broke out in Europe. As soon as German weapons were pointed towards France, the Inayat family were forced to return to London, where, unfortunately, the family initially struggled to make ends meet because

Inayat Khan could not find regular work while the war was raging across the continent. During this period, young Noor experienced much poverty and hardship, so much so that there were days when the family had no food other than just bread. However, her parents made up for the hardship by showering her with generous amounts of warmth, affection and love, not least because she was their first-born.

In 1915, her father formally established his Sufi Order in the West – which was defined by a novel understanding of religion, rather than being strictly-speaking Islamic – and, a year later, her brother, Vilayat Inayat Khan (1916–2004) was born. Noor was very fond of her brother – she grew up with him and became his best friend. However, as the war continued to rage across Europe, her father responded by actively disseminating his Sufi message of peace, happiness and spirituality at a time of considerable turmoil, hardship and uncertainty. Needless to say, his message of oneness of Divinity and Truth (*tawhid*); oneness of religion and morality; oneness of brotherhood and humanity; and, peace with one self and nature soon resonated, as new branches of the Sufi Order were soon opened in London, Brighton, Harrogate and elsewhere.³

When Noor was only 3 years old, her family moved from their modest residence on Ladbroke Road to a more spacious property in Gordon Square, thanks to the financial support provided by her father's growing number of *murids* (spiritual followers or disciples). Here, the Inayat family lived in more comfortable circumstances, although financially, they still continued to struggle to make ends meet. By all accounts, Noor was a bright, caring, but equally sensitive child who enjoyed listening to music and fairy tales. Indeed, on one occasion 'when she heard that children in Russia had nothing to eat she took it to heart, although she was only four. She began demanding chocolates from the adults, and as soon as she got one she would leave the room. Later her parents found she had a big box full of chocolates in her room, which she was collecting for the Russian children.'⁴ After six years in London, Noor's family were forced to move again, as the British authorities became increasingly suspicious of her father's religious activities, as well as his growing links to prominent Indian nationalists (such as Mahatma Gandhi and Sarojini Naidu), who were, at the time, actively campaigning for India's freedom and independence from British rule.

Thankfully, the First World War had formally ended in November 1918 and that, in turn, prompted the Inayat family to make preparations to leave London in favour of France. In 1920, when Noor was only six, they moved to an old house in the French village of Tremblaye, located towards the north of Paris, which belonged to one of her father's English disciples. Being cold and damp, the family struggled to settle in this property and soon moved to Wissous, a small town located towards the south of Paris. They stayed there until 1922, when one of Inayat Khan's Dutch disciples offered to buy him and his family a property at Suresnes, which is today a commune in the western suburbs of Paris. He named it Fazal Manzil (or the 'House of Grace') and it lived up to its name. The family found it to be an open, spacious and peaceful residence, not only

for themselves, but also for Inayat's growing stream of visitors who came from far and wide seeking spiritual guidance.

It was at Fazal Manzil that Inayat formally initiated the practice of Universal Worship, which combined aspects of Sufi teachings (such as the communal performance of *Dhikr*) with Christian devotion, and was influenced by other eastern traditions and faiths. Noor grew up observing and learning from her father's eclectic approach to religion, and as such, she was encouraged by her parents to read Buddhist, Hindu and Christian literature, in addition to the Qur'an. At the age of eight, she enrolled at the local *College Moderne de Fille* and soon became fluent in French. She wrote short stories and poems in French and English during this period, and became proficient in both Sufi and Western music with the help of her father.

As Inayat Khan was busy promoting his Sufi movement – with new branches being established in England, America, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Scandinavia – he was hardly at home to spend time with his family. Noor was barely 12 when her father was taken seriously ill, perhaps due to over-work and exhaustion. He therefore decided to go to India for recuperation, nominating his 10-year old son, Vilayat, as his spiritual successor. In September 1926, he left his family behind and set out for India where he visited several cities, including New Delhi, and visited the *Dargah* (mausoleum) of Sultan al-Mashaykh Hazrat Shaykh Nizam al-Din Awliya (1238–1325), the famous Muslim saint of India, to pay homage to the great spiritual preceptor of Muslim India. A few months later, he was taken seriously ill and died at the age of only 44.⁵

The news of Inayat's death came down like thunder from the heavens for his young family; Ameena Begum was too distraught to face reality, while Noor was forced to shoulder family responsibilities, despite only being 13 at the time. Thankfully, a few months later, the family were able to go to India to visit the tomb of Inayat Khan, as well as the *Dargah* of Khwajah Mu'in al-Din Chishti (1141–1236) in Ajmer, the founder of the Chishtiyah Sufi Order in India, with financial support from Inayat's European disciples. This was the first time that Noor had visited her ancestral home and, needless to say, she was impressed by the religious and cultural diversity of India, but saddened by the widespread poverty and squalor that she had witnessed there.

On her return to Suresnes, Noor combined family responsibilities with high school education at the *Lycee de Jeunes* in St Cloud, where she studied European languages, including English, French and German, in addition to participating in sports. Noor dearly missed her father, but always kept her feelings to herself as her mother was struggling to come to terms with her husband's death. During this period, Noor read extensively and wrote poetry expressing her love, affection and support for her parents. In one poem, which was addressed to her mother, she wrote:

Beloved! Ah! Beloved Amma,
 A treasure stored deep in our hearts,
 'Tis flowers of our gratitude,
 A treasure that n'er will depart.
 Behold! For their petals are carved
 With Allah's own heavenly art,
 Their beauty on this longed for day,
 To you and Abba we impart.
 Through life's struggle and through life's strife,
 May we treasure as our life's gem
 The seed in our heart, you have sown,
 Ah! Quote in the sacred Nirtan,
 And always remember this:
 The path of the heart is thorny,
 Which leads in the end to bliss.⁶

By all accounts, this was a profoundly moving, deeply thoughtful and equally impressive poem for a 15-year old to compose, but Noor was an exceptionally gifted and insightful teenager. Two years later, she successfully completed her Baccalaureate (equivalent to a certificate of secondary education). Thereafter, she studied music at the Ecole Normale de Musique de Paris, along with child psychology at the Sorbonne, University of Paris. She soon became an accomplished musician, combining classical Sufi Indian music with the Western musical tradition, before graduating from the Sorbonne in 1938 at the age of 24.

By now, Noor had also become a gifted linguist, being fluent in German, Spanish and Hindi, in addition to English, French and Urdu. She also learnt to read the Qur'an in Arabic. Despite her education and language skills, Noor chose to become a writer rather than a teacher. Encouraged by Baroness van Tuyll, who was a family friend and a member of the Sufi fraternity, she translated twenty stories from the Jataka Tales for publication. Accompanied by illustrations produced by Henriette Willebeek le Mair, her collection of traditional Buddhist stories, shortened and simplified for young individuals, was subsequently published in London by George G. Harrap in 1939.⁷ In addition to this, Noor became a notable journalist, contributing as she did, articles and stories to prominent French newspapers and magazines, including the *Le Figaro*, *Sunday Figaro* and *Paris Soir*, among other publications.

At a time when the young journalist was well on her way to becoming a professional writer, the Second World War broke out in Europe. On 1 September 1939, when Noor was only 25, the Nazis, led by Adolf Hitler (1889–1945), who became the Chancellor of Germany back in 1933, invaded Poland. Prior to this, the Nazis had annexed Austria without provoking a backlash from the other European powers. Emboldened by his

gain, Hitler then laid claim to Czechoslovakia. Britain and France swiftly responded by declaring war against Nazi Germany. Needless to say, Noor and her family were gripped by fear and panic even though there were no visible signs of war in Paris at the time.

In the meantime, Germany had invaded Denmark and Norway, and Winston Churchill (1874–1965) succeeded Neville Chamberlain (1869–1940) as the British Prime Minister on 10 May 1940. Germany then launched an offensive against France while Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg succumbed to the Nazis. As the war raged across Europe, the Sufi fraternity, established by Inayat Khan, found themselves facing a serious dilemma. The Sufi message was, of course, one of peace and harmony, but in the face of imminent danger of Nazi invasion, what were they supposed to do? Continue preaching the message of peace or take a principled stand against Nazi aggression and brutality? Noor and her brother, Vilayat, felt they could not stand by and watch the Nazis run riot across Europe, for that would certainly have been against spirituality, morality and common sense.

Determined to join the fight against the Nazis, Noor and her family decided to move to England in June 1940 and join the war effort. In the meantime, Paris had fallen into German hands and the Nazis now turned their attention to Britain. Noor and her family soon reached Bordeaux and, from there, the family reached Falmouth in Cornwall before moving to Southampton to stay with a family friend. They then travelled to Oxford, except Vilayat, who moved to London to enlist for service in the Royal Air Force (RAF), although, unfortunately, ill-health forced him to return to his family in Oxford.

However, London soon came under sustained attack from the Nazis after the declaration of the Battle of Britain in August 1940. As the situation in London became desperate, Noor volunteered at the Fulmer Chase Maternity Home for Officers' Wives, located near Slough. She then joined the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF), which was established in June 1939, to support the RAF by freeing the men to go and fight in the battlefield. Noor joined the WAAF in November 1940 as 424598 ACW2. Despite being a Muslim, the authorities registered her as Nora Inayat Khan who belonged to the Church of England (CoE); according to Noor's biographers, this was probably done to avoid unnecessary complications.⁸

After being recruited into the WAAF, along with forty other women, Noor received training to become a wireless radio operator at RAF Balloon Command in Edinburgh. During her six months of training there, her mother also moved to be close to her daughter. She passed all her exams and was promoted to the post of Aircraftswoman (First Class) to serve at RAF Bomber Command in Abingdon. She was, according to her colleagues, a helpful, efficient and effective transmitter of messages. The fact that none of her colleagues knew anything about her family, background or faith, must have been rather liberating for her as, prior to this, she had always been known as the daughter of Hazrat Inayat Khan of the Sufi Order in the West.

During this period, she worked long shifts and continued to receive training in Advance Signals and Wireless communication. To add to the confusion, the Indian independence movement became very active at the time, but Noor remained committed to the fight against the Nazis, for she felt, the campaign for Indian liberation from British rule must not be allowed to undermine the battle against Hitler's Germany. Soon, her brother, Vilayat, had passed his Royal Navy examination and joined HMS Collingwood and Noor, in turn, was promoted to the post of Leading Aircraftswoman on 1 December 1942. Needless to say, her skills, loyalty and hard work did not go unnoticed as the military intelligence now became interested in recruiting her for special operations, thanks to her linguistic and technical skills.

In due course she was invited to an interview, which she attended in November 1942 at the War Office in London, to join the Special Operations Executive (SOE), which was created by Prime Minister Winston Churchill in the summer of 1940 to 'set Europe ablaze' by conducting a covert war against the German Fascists, in addition to the overt military campaign that was already raging across Europe. Considering that Noor was only 28 at the time, it could be argued that she did not fully understand what her new role would be in the SOE. That is to say, she may not have realised that her new role involved carrying out espionage, infiltration, sabotage and counter-insurgency against the Nazi war machine and its intelligence services.

However, according to the British official who interviewed her for the job, Noor was not only fully aware of the task ahead and the serious risks associated with such work, but she was also raring to take the battle to the Fascists.⁹ As expected, after being discharged from WAAF, she joined the First Aid and Nursing Yeomanry (otherwise known as the Women's Transport Service), which, in reality, was a cover for female secret agents to undertake their training without being detected. Her salary was fixed at £350 a year which was paid quarterly into her Lloyds Bank account, and she signed the Official Secrets Act on 15 February 1943 at the age of 29. Thereafter, she undertook all necessary training at SOE schools where she became known as 'Nora Baker', some of her superiors expressed their reservations regarding her suitability for undercover warfare, but her fluency in French and competence in wireless communication, along with the dire shortage of agents, worked in her favour.

Once her training was completed, Noor assumed her code name of 'Madeleine' and 'Jeanne-Marie Renie', before being flown into northern France. She became the first female radio operator to go to France to work as an agent, and made her way to Paris. She joined the 'Physician' network along with two other female agents, namely Diana Rowden (code named Paulette/Chaplain) and Cecily Lefort (code named Alice/Teacher), with Francis Suttill (code named Prosper) being in charge. The network consisted of several circuits and sub-circuits, often consisting of three agents, namely the organiser, the courier and the radio operator. The role of the latter was particularly important because all communication between the agents and the SOE headquarters in

London took place through the radio operator, and the notorious Gestapo (Nazi secret police) were only too aware of this.

Unsurprisingly, they deliberately targeted the radio operators in order to disrupt and undermine British counter-insurgency activities in occupied France. As a result, in just over a month, the Nazis had captured all the radio operators connected with the Physician network, except for Noor, who soon became a real thorn in their side. She not only eluded the Gestapo, but also continued to transmit messages to London despite numerous mishaps, miscommunication and incompetence in London, as well as in Paris, coupled with counter-infiltration by Nazi double agents.

In the face of such mounting challenges and difficulties, according to Colonel Maurice Buckmaster (1902–1992), who was the leader of the French section of SOE in London, Noor even turned down an offer to return to England and, instead, continued to communicate with London at a time when the rest of her circuit almost ceased to exist. That was, by all accounts, a truly brave and extraordinary achievement on her part. Frustrated by their failure to capture Noor, the Gestapo now considered her to be the most wanted British secret agent in Paris and pursued her actively. She, in turn, kept on moving from one place to another and transmitted messages to London intermittently to avoid being detected by wireless vans operated by the enemy. At a time when radio operators did not survive more than a few weeks, Noor continued her work for no less than four months before being captured on or around 13 October 1943; she was reportedly betrayed by a double agent, or a fellow SOE officer, who may have revealed her identity to the Nazis.¹⁰

After being captured, she made several attempts to escape but was unsuccessful. Eventually, she was taken to Germany on 27 November 1943 and spent the next ten months in solitary confinement at a high security prison, being classified as ‘highly dangerous’ due to her refusal to co-operate and disclose information to the Nazis. Then, in September 1944, Noor and three other SOE agents were moved to the Dachau Concentration Camp and, two days later, they were all executed; Noor was only 30 at the time of her death. Her last word was ‘Liberte’.

Lest we should forget, it is worth remembering that Noor was a young Muslim woman of Indian-American origin, who made the highest sacrifice for our freedom, liberty and democracy, which we rightly cherish and enjoy today, both in Britain and the West as a whole. In recognition of her remarkable courage, bravery, loyalty and sacrifices for Britain and France, on 16 January 1946, Noor was posthumously awarded the Croix de Guerre with Gold Star by the French government, the country’s highest civilian award.

Likewise, the British government awarded her the George Cross on 5 April 1949, which is also Britain’s highest civilian honour. The award citation summed up her achievements in these words: ‘Assistant Section Officer [Noor] Inayat Khan displayed the most conspicuous courage, both moral and physical, over a period of more than

twelve months.’¹¹ On 8 November 2012, a statue of Noor Inayat Khan was unveiled in Gordon Square, London by The Princess Royal, and the Royal Mail also issued a stamp in memory of her life and contribution to Britain on 25 March 2014 under the caption ‘Remarkable Lives’.



1. Donald Sommerville and Ian Westwell, *The Complete Illustrated History of the First and Second World Wars: An Authoritative Account of the Two of the Deadliest Conflicts in Human History*.
2. Elisabeth Keesing, *Hazrat Inayat Khan: A Biography*.
3. Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan, *The Message in Our Time: The Life and Teachings of the Sufi Master, Pir-O-Murshid Inayat Khan*.
4. Shrabani Basu, *Spy Princess: The Life of Noor Inayat Khan*.
5. Elisabeth Keesing, op. cit.
6. Quoted by Shrabani Basu, op. cit.
7. See Noor Inayat Khan, *Twenty Jataka Tales*, recently reissued by Inner Traditions India.
8. Shrabani Basu, op. cit.
9. Elisabeth Keesing, op. cit., and Shrabani Basu, op. cit.
10. Gaby Halberstam, *Noor Inayat Khan: Muslim Pacifist, British Spy, National Hero*.
11. Quoted by Shrabani Basu, op. cit.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Muhammad Mojlum Khan was born in 1973 in Habiganj, Bangladesh and was brought up and educated in England. He is an award-winning British writer, literary critic and research scholar. He has published more than 200 essays and articles worldwide and his writings have been translated into several languages. He is the author of the bestselling *The Muslim 100* (2008) and *The Muslim Heritage of Bengal* (2013). He is a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland and Director of the Bengal Muslim Research Institute UK.

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Makers of Western Islam

MUHAMMAD MOJLUM KHAN

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