Elie Kedourie famously said that all “nationalist movements are children’s crusades”. In this vein we can describe the Twentieth century as the ‘Age of Extremes’ and also as the Age of Youth – both these characterisation are inextricably linked with each other.

As in many other countries around the globe, youth and volunteer organization played an important role in the Indian nationalist movement(s). First, on a discursive level since Youth acted as a somatic bridge into the future, in other words a projection surface to imagine and create an ideal Indian national(ist). Secondly, on a practical level, with such groups serving as microcosms of the nation to be, where the art of social mobilization, national discipline and inculcating moral values could be experimentally implemented.

This lecture will give an overview of the complicated history of schemes aimed at mobilising, training (and arguably militarising) youth in an anti-colonial context and trace the fortunes of some of these groups during the Second World War, the Partition of India, and into the immediate post-colonial period. It argues that this seemingly marginal element of the anti-colonial movement can tell us much about the ‘underbelly’ of Indian nationalism(s), but also about the problems we confront when studying young people as historical actors.

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