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Transitions

Britain's Decolonization of India and Pakistan

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There is still considerable controversy surrounding Britain's exit from South Asia, despite the publication of official documents concerned with the transfer of power, the best collection edited by Nicholas Mansergh in 12 volumes, and an almost continuous and uninterrupted series of publications about the process, its origins, and its outcomes since 1947.[1] Although difficult to select the very best scholarship amongst a glittering array of academic work, one is drawn to the works of two of the most cited individuals in particular, both from Oxford, namely Professor Judith Brown and Dr John Darwin.[2] While Brown traced the Indian nationalist drive towards independence, Darwin highlighted how domestic British democratization, new post-war agendas of welfare and economic stabilization, and the diminished relative importance of India to the UK economy pushed the government of Clement Attlee towards the conclusion that India must go. Some have chosen to see the transfer of power as either a nationalist triumph, forcing the British out, while others focus on decolonization, that is to say, a process led by the metropolitan centre in London. Yet, this is an artificial and selective reading of the sources. Brown's and Darwin's works are in fact complimentary, since it was the combined effect of unrest in India and new priorities for the British at home that led to India's independence.

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[1] Nicholas Mansergh, ed., *Constitutional Relations between Britain and India: The Transfer of Power, 1942–47*, 12 vols, (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1970–83).

[2] Judith M. Brown, *Modern India: The Origins of an Asian Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); John Darwin, *Britain and Decolonization: The Retreat from Empire in the ~~Post-war~~ World* (London: Macmillan, 1987).

Lord Ismay, the Viceroy's Chief of Staff, and Hugh Dalton, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, summed up the dual effect of domestic priorities and local pressure. On 24 February 1947, Dalton noted: 'when you are in a place where you are not wanted, and where you have not got the force, or perhaps the will, to squash those who don't want you, the only thing to do is to come out. . . . I don't believe that one person in a hundred thousand in this country cares tuppence about it, as long as British people are not being mauled about out there'.[3] Lord Ismay recorded:

> Before I left England on 18th March, I was doubtful whether a mistake had not been made in fixing the date for the transfer of power to Indian hands as early as June 1948. I had been in India for a week before it was borne in on me that so far from being too early, it was too late. I got the impression that in a very short time we should find ourselves still saddled with tremendous responsibilities, but equipped with no power wherewith to discharge them. The few British officials that were still in service were at the end of their tether . . . British arms were represented by little more than token forces.[4]

Both of these accounts underscore some of the factors common to other transitions, such as domestic public opinion, the effect of one's own casualties on that opinion, the limitations of force and the concerns about published timetables for withdrawal.

In recent interventions involving military force, Western political leaders have been eager to emphasize the short-term nature of occupation, in part to avoid the deeply unpopular idea of colonialism. The inherent contradiction of a *short-term* military intervention for the purpose of stabilization is that stabilization can take years, even decades. Moreover, the history of early colonial interventions, including those in India, also revealed that, in the ~~short term,~~ the use of military force can sometimes create further destabilization. Indeed, the British conquest of India was conducted in stages, with the British presence, coterminous with unstable polities, seemingly making further military interventions more likely, despite the disapproval of Parliament.[5] British liberals nevertheless came to believe that British rule, based on the rule of law and public accountability, was preferable to the rule of corrupt and abusive Indian princes. James Mill, scholar and author of the *History of India*, in giving evidence to the Commons' Select Committee on 16 February 1832 argued: 'In my opinion the best thing for the happiness of the people is that our government should be nominally, as well as really, extended over those territories; that our own modes of governing should be adopted and our own people put in charge of government.'[6] In 1839, Thomas ~~Babbington~~ Macaulay, the Law member of the Governor-General's Council, advocated a British educational system for India in order to create a cadre of Indians able to assist the British in this enlightened and Western style of government.[7] He envisaged that: 'it may be that the public mind of India may expand under our system 'til it has outgrown that system, that by good government we may educate our subjects into a capacity for good government; that having been instructed in European knowledge, they may in some future date, demand European institutions.'[8] Such sentiments were later used to support the idea that the British had always been moving India towards self-government, although Indian nationalists suggested that the British had long been engaged in 'constitution-mongering' in order to delay genuine autonomy and independence. Even at the time, there were critics from within the British establishment in India. Sir John Malcolm, the Governor of Bombay (1826–30), believed:

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[3] Hugh Dalton, *High Tide and After: Memoirs, 1945–60* (London: F. Muller, 1962), p. 211.

[4] Cited in Robin J. Moore, *Escape from Empire: The Attlee Government and the Indian Problem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 238.

[5] 28 May 1782, *Journals of the House of Commons*, vol. Xxxviii (1780–82), p. 1032.

> Our greatest error in India appears to have been a desire to establish systems founded on general principles.... In our precipitate attempts to improve the condition of the people, we have often proceeded without sufficient knowledge.... I have been led, by what I have seen, to apprehend as much danger from *political* as well as religious zealots.[9]

Many scholars have sought to trace the origins of transition in India and it was often asserted that the transfer of power was part of Britain's overall 'decline'. Bernard Porter, historian of the British Empire, was not alone in arguing that this decline set in from the 1870s, and Peter Cain and Anthony Hopkins posited that Britain became an ageing and defensive power, increasingly reliant on the City to stave off the inevitable shrivelling of British global influence.[10] Undoubtedly, the shift in global power at the end of the Second World War, and the onset of the Cold War, had its impact. The scholarly debate has been fully explored by John Darwin, and it is clear that what shaped the government's decisions was a combination of structural changes in strategic relationships, and shifts in economic and military power. There was pragmatic decision making about the best way to manage change and yet maintain influence, and thus uphold Britain's national interests.[11] While Britain was sometimes confronted with fait accompli, it attempted to control the processes of drawdown and decolonization: it did so with mixed success.

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[6] James Mill, cited in Frederick Madden and David Fieldhouse, eds, *Imperial Reconstruction, 1740–1840: The Evolution of Alternative Systems of Government* (New York: Greenwood, 1987), p. 246.

[7] John Keay, *India: A History* (London: Harper Collins, 2000), pp. 429–30.

[8] Eric Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 45.

[9] Select Committee of Enquiry into the Affairs of the East India Company, 17 April 1832, *Parliamentary Papers*, XIV, 1831–32, p. 36.

[10] Bernard Porter, *The Lion's Share: A Short History of British Imperialism*, 2nd edn (London: Longmans, ~~1975,~~ 1984); Peter J. Cain and Anthony G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Crisis and Deconstruction, 1914–1990* (London: Longmans, 1993).

Among the central strands of the British government's approach to transition was a desire to maintain the country's reputation and prestige. For a nation whose wealth had been founded on global trade, the British were eager to preserve their business links. Where formal empire and expensive physical possession could be transferred into a partnership with economic benefits for both, then this was the option pursued. Yet the process was not smooth or applied consistently. In the 1950s there was still hope that Southeast Asian and African colonies could be developed as components of a Sterling Bloc. Nevertheless the concern to maintain Britain's international reputation, as a state that would honour international agreements and uphold international law, was significant.[12] Government correspondence about the establishing of Pakistan in 1948 reveals that relations with the Superpowers, but also with the Arab-Muslim world, influenced thinking about future support for the new Pakistan. Complimenting this first principle was the desire to maintain good relations with the newly independent state, for which the Commonwealth provided a useful constitutional and diplomatic mechanism. Again, membership was not without its own problems, particularly as India and Pakistan insisted on the status of republics, and Burma, part of the Indian Empire, refused to join; but solutions were found. Despite the success of the Commonwealth, after 1945 Britain's priorities had shifted towards closer relations with the United States and Europe. Relinquishing India made the process of alignment with the 1949 NATO pact far easier.

In practical terms, the British favoured a gradual transfer of power which gave them the opportunity to train and develop a new political elite with whom they could conduct business and cordial diplomacy in the future. In essence this meant that peaceful transfers of power were essential, but faith in gradualism periodically threatened to sour relations. Attempts to introduce local governance in India in the Inter-War Years, the so-called Montagu-Chelmsford reforms and the subsequent 1935 Government of India Act, which together established 'dyarchy' and self-government in the provinces under British central guardianship, was seen by Indian nationalist leaders as a deliberate attempt to avoid granting dominion status and progressing to full national devolution. The failure to grant dominion status in 1931 left Indians as 'second class' imperial citizens, despite a significant contribution to the British war effort in 1914–18. Consequently, there was widespread civil unrest. Nevertheless, there was success in bringing Indians into the Indian Civil Service, the development of civil society, professional training in the medical professions, the appointment of Indian officers as part of the 'Indianisation' of the Indian Army, and expansion of the Indian service sector in the economy.

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[11] John Darwin, *The End of the British Empire: The Historical Debate* (London: Blackwell, 1991).

[12] Ronald Hyam, ed., *The Labour Government and the End of Empire, 1945–51* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1994).

The outbreak of the Second World War interrupted and threatened to jeopardize the process of transition. Despite the sentiments of the Atlantic Charter of 1941, which stressed that the democracies were fighting for the freedom of occupied peoples, the British government initially ignored the Indian National Congress and then, through the Cripps Mission of March 1942, offered places in the Viceroy's Council, with promises of representative government and dominion status after the war. The British also insisted on the protection of minorities' interests and the freedom for individual provinces to elect to join an Indian Union, which was a way of preserving the Princely States. Incensed by the lack of progress, fearful that Muslims would stay outside a united India, and inspired by Mohandas Gandhi's campaign of non-cooperation, the Indian National Congress launched a 'Quit India' movement on 8 August 1942.[13]

The Quit India campaign was supposed to be a mass movement of non-violence, where the retraction of cooperation with the British would force the Raj to collapse. Brutality would be met with *satyagraha* which assumed the self-sacrifice of Gandhi and his supporters would shame the British into halting their operations. Fully informed by their comprehensive intelligence, the British swooped on the ringleaders before the campaign had even begun, and eventually some 66,000 were incarcerated. Using wartime legislation, the press was banned from reporting the campaign, Congress Committees were temporarily outlawed and its offices and papers seized.[14] The radical wing of the movement advocated a campaign of sabotage, but Congress leaders knew that, while the Indian Army remained loyal to the British, there was no chance of a violent campaign succeeding.[15] Nevertheless, Gandhi and the Congress leaders were unable to persuade all their followers to adopt an entirely non-violent path. News of Gandhi's arrest sparked two weeks of rioting whilst *hartals* (boycotting) and civil disobedience spread. Disruptions to food supply caused acute shortages in some areas. Telephone lines, post offices, courts, revenue offices, and even police stations were the targets for attack and arson. In extreme cases, railway tracks were torn up. At its height, the Quit India campaign required an entire British division to be diverted to Bombay to quash the unrest. But the vulnerability of the strategic railways really alarmed the British authorities, and the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, authorized the RAF to fly sorties over crowds to keep them off railway lines running across the Eastern Provinces and Bihar which led to the precarious front lines against the Japanese.[16] Pilots were instructed to fly low, fire Verey light flares and warning shots. Congress accused the British of machine gunning the demonstrators.[17] The British authorities were prepared to take every measure necessary to crush the unrest in order to release the 35,000 troops that they might need as a strategic reserve to confront a Japanese offensive. The calculation was that they had a window of opportunity of just six weeks before that attack came. Linlithgow informed Churchill that he was:

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[13] British Library, Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections, formerly the India Office Records, hereafter IOR. Coll. 117/C27/QA: Gandhi, 'Quit India' movement and disturbances: statistics supplied by Central and Provincial Governments, Sep 1942–Jul 1944, L/PJ/8/630, IOR; Coll. 117/C27/Q Pt 1: Gandhi, 'Quit India' movement and disturbances: calendars of events, narratives, reports and other information compiled in India to assist Secretary of State in replying to Parliamentary Questions, Sep 1942–Apr 1943, L/PJ/8/627, IOR; Coll. 117/C27/Q Pt 2: Gandhi, 'Quit India' movement and disturbances: calendars of events, narratives, reports and other information compiled in India to assist Secretary of State in replying to Parliamentary Questions, 1942–Nov 1945, L/PJ/8/628, IOR.

[14] Warnings of unrest preceded the campaign and Cabinet had approved stronger measures to safeguard the war effort and the defence of India. War Cabinet 91 (42), secret, 13 July 1942, and enclosures Governor General to Sec. State India, 11 July 1942 and Government of India Home Department to Sec State India, 11 July 1942, CAB 65/27/7, ~~TNA~~. See also War Cabinet, secret, 'Policy to be Adopted towards Mr Gandhi', 27 June 1942, CAB 66/26/1, TNA which showed a willingness to take a stronger line with Reuters and the media.

> engaged here in meeting by far the most serious rebellion since that of 1857, the gravity and extent of which we have so far concealed for reasons of military security.... Mob violence remains rampant over large tracts of the countryside and I am by no means confident that we may not see in September a formidable effort to renew this widespread sabotage of our war effort.[18]

When the idea of strafing saboteurs from the air was raised in the House of Commons on 8 October 1942, there was support for a firm line.[19] Eventually, with the Indian Army and its British units at full stretch, the campaign was brought to manageable levels of violence.

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[15] An assessment of the unrest by Congress was intercepted by Military Intelligence. WO 208/819A, 25C, TNA. The British Central Intelligence Department was very well informed about INC plans, having intercepted mail and penetrated the organization at various levels. CID briefings were held daily or every two days at the height of the crisis. See Home Department: History of the Congress Rebellion, Part 1, 1942–3, *Gandhi's Independence Campaign: Statistics to assist the S[ecretary of] S[tate] to reply to P[arliamentary] Questions]* L/PJ/8/628, IOR.

[16] Interestingly, the General Staff and Home Department had already discussed the possibility of creating a paramilitary force for internal security police in 1941, especially for strategic railway protection, 174/44/41, *Gandhi's Independence Campaign: Statistics to assist the S[ecretary of] S[tate] to reply to P[arliamentary] Questions]* L/PJ/8/628, IOR.

[17] Lawrence James, *Raj: The Making and Unmaking of British India* (London: Little Brown and Company, 1997), p. 566; P. N. Chopra, '"Quit India" Movement of 1942', *Journal of Indian History* 49, no. 145/147 (1971): pp. 39–40 and P. N. Chopra, *Quit India: British Secret Documents* (New Delhi: Interprint, 1986). The crew of one of these aircraft that crash landed was murdered by a mob.

[18] N. M. Mansergh, E. W. R. Lumby and P. Moon, eds, *Constitutional Relations between Britain and India: The Transfer of Power: 1942–47*, II (London: Allen and Unwin, 1970), pp. 853–4.

[19] Hansard, 5th Series, 383, p. 1342.

Nevertheless, the Government of India remained concerned about the potentially disastrous effect of Congress and Japanese propaganda, as revealed by the correspondence surrounding the Special Powers Ordinance for the Military Operational Area passed in 1943.[20] The Ordinance provided for the setting up of measures to deal with fifth column activity in the zone behind the front line. This Ordinance was seen as preferable to full martial law which ran the risk of the army acting in an unrestrained and heavy handed way. The Viceroy was concerned that, in previous episodes of martial law, the army in Bihar had established special courts 'untrammelled by the usual controls', which tended to be 'hasty in decision and inadequate in record of summaries of evidence', adding 'I fear the same results if the army is given *carte blanche*'.[21] General Molesworth, responsible for the area close to the Japanese lines, wanted careful drafting of what the limits of military authority and jurisdiction were.[22] It seems that both the army and the government were eager to maintain the primacy of political leadership and to ensure close civil–military cooperation. Yet, from 1943, it was clear that British authority now rested on less secure foundations. The authorities anticipated that the end of the war would mean a return to widespread violence that the ~~A~~rmy would be unwilling and perhaps unable to contain. Army Headquarters informed the Military Secretary: 'It is fair to say that, as the war draws to its close . . . the general I[nternal] S[ecurity] position is bound to deteriorate, as interested parties begin to prepare (as they are now preparing) for the eventual struggle for power'.[23] In 1945, plans drawn up to deal with political agitation and violence showed that everything depended on the loyalty of the Indian troops, but this could not be taken for granted.[24] The additional pressure was that thousands of Indian soldiers were being demobilized after the war and were in need of work.

The issue of greatest sensitivity was the fate of Indian troops who had either defected to the Japanese as Indian National Army (INA) personnel, or the Indian sailors who had mutinied for better conditions at the end of the war. While there was sympathy for those who had rioted because of their eagerness

[20] On Indian Army morale see, for example, 'Secret Appreciation of Indian Morale', Overseas Planning Committee, Ministry of Information, 1942, INF 1/556, TNA. The situation was assessed by Brig. W. J. Cawthorn, DMI, in 'Reactions in Indian units to Japanese Propaganda', Most Secret, Weekly Intelligence Survey, India Internal, 31 Mar 1944, L/WS/1433, IOR and 'The Future of the Internal Security Situation in India', 31 Aug 1942, L/WS/1/1337, IOR. Measures had already been designed from the outbreak of the war, see J. A. Thorne, *Confidential report on the control during the war of the press, broadcasting and films, and on publicity of the purpose of the war*, Delhi, 1939, L/I/1/1136, IOR.

[21] Viceroy to Secretary of State for India, telegram, Secret 36616, 23 Sep 1943, L/PJ/8/566, IOR.

[22] Note by Under Secretary of State, 29 Sep 1943, L/PJ/8/566, IOR.

[23] GHQ (India) to the Military Secretary, India Office, Most Secret, 20 Dec 1942, L/WS/1/1337, IOR.

[24] Defence HQ Outline Plan, Operation Asylum, Most Secret, 9 Dec 1945, L/WS/2/65, IOR; Chiefs of Staff Committee, Indian Army, 'Subversive attempts on the loyalty of the Indian Army', Secret, 10 May 1943, L/WS/1/707, IOR.

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to demobilize, many Indian 'regulars' believed the former INA men should be punished as traitors. During the war, they had fought them in Burma and were often unimpressed by their allegiances or their fighting ability. At its height, the INA had mustered ~~430,000~~ personnel, a not insignificant number, although it could not sustain this size throughout the war and many of the INA subsequently rejoined the British-led war effort. Nevertheless, Indian civilians were more anxious, especially when the war ended. When ~~Lieutenant-General~~ Sir Francis Tuker, commanding IVth Indian Corps, suggested deporting the former INA men to Japan or perhaps use 'the wall and the firing squad', Indian politicians feared that the British might attempt a reign of terror. Jawarhalal Nehru and Congress seized the opportunity to turn the INA into a national cause, arguing that the INA had fought for India's freedom. Attempts to have INA men tried under the Indian Penal Code gave the nationalists the public platform they needed to promote the cause of independence.

Wavell, as Viceroy (1943–47), attempted to work out a solution with each of the factions in Indian politics, but, for all his charm, empathy, and intellectual ability, he was simply unable to get agreement. Wavell summed up the squabbling by borrowing from Lewis Carroll's 'Jabberwocky': 'Twas brillig; and the Congreelites / Did harge and shobble in the swope, / All jinsy were the Pakistanites, / and the spruft Sikhs outscrope'.[25] Mohammed Ali Jinnah, leading the Muslim League, eventually tired of the talks and declared a Direct Action Day on 16 August 1946. Designed to assert that Muslims' interests had to respected, the demonstrations merely deepened existing communal antagonism with Hindus. Some 4,000 were killed in the fighting. The increasing violence around India put an additional burden on the Indian Army which was now much diminished in size and strength since the end of the war.[26]

On 7 September 1946, Wavell drew up a secret plan for the withdrawal from India 'in the event of a political breakdown'.[27] Only a select handful were party to the plan, and there was agreement that such a plan was needed as the 'best solution to our difficulties if we cannot get the parties to co-operate in producing a solution'. Wavell admitted that whatever the decision in London, there was 'an administrative limitation to the continuance of our control', noting that he assumed the government at home was not about to announce a decision to continue to rule in India for another fifteen or twenty years'. One is given the impression that this would have been the preference of the secret committee as the means to 'rally support to our side and . . . involve the immediate reinforcement of the [armed] services'. Wavell believed that, such was the atmosphere in India, 'one must either rule firmly or not at all'. Coloured by his experiences through the war, he observed that: 'With a largely uneducated and highly excitable people, easily moved to violence, it is essential that agitation and incitement to unbridled riot should be stopped at once'.[28]

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[25] Cited in Trevor Royle, *The Last Days of the Raj* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), p. 150.

[26] Auchinleck felt the army, reduced to 800,000 with plans for a reduction to 340,000 by mid-1947, was too small to manage the internal security burdens placed upon it. Political Intelligence, 1946, L/WS/1/1009, IOR.

[27] Lord Wavell, 'A Policy for India', Top Secret, Sep 1946, L/PO/6/116, IOR.

Nevertheless, Wavell was concerned not only with physical security, but the capacity to actually administer the country. He noted: 'the machinery on which our control in India has depended is rapidly running down . . . [the Indian Civil Service] have always been few in number and their effect has depended on their prestige, their confidence that they can rely on the support of the government, and their solidarity', but now Wavell felt that Indianization had eroded the service and made it susceptible to communal preferences. The situation was similar for the Provincial and subordinate services, especially the police:

> These have been diluted during the war; and service traditions have been weakened. Communal or sectional interests are now powerful and loyalty to the government has been undermined . . . partly by the knowledge that British control will soon terminate and that the services must look for the prospects to new masters. It is, therefore, no longer possible to rely implicitly upon them to carry out the orders of a British Government. Similar considerations apply to the Army, though, at present in a much less degree.

Wavell warned his colleagues that 'law and order in the country depends almost entirely on the reliability and cohesion of the Indian Army' but 'one cannot expect to maintain indefinitely the integrity of the Army while both the main political parties are preaching communal war and when it is known that the British officers, who alone hold the army together, are leaving soon'.[29] Wavell advised that in the provinces, a governor could no longer afford to over-rule his Indian ministry on an issue on which they had threatened to resign, since he would be able to call on no one else. He cautioned that a Governor could only really enforce his decisions 'to a limited degree by persuasion and bluff'. Wavell estimated that Britain would only be able to enforce its will for one and half years longer at best.

In London, the government was soon brought to the same judgement. The Cabinet concluded on 10 December 1946:

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[28] For this, the morale of the Indian Army was critical. Morale Reports, September 1946, L/WS/1/1637, IOR.

[29] Similar views were expressed by General Tucker, see: M. D. Wainwright, 'Keeping the Peace in India, 1946–7: The Role of Lt General Sir Francis Tuker in Eastern Command', in *The Partition of India: Policies and Perspectives, 1935–1947*, edited by C. H. Philips and M. D. Wainwright (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1970).

> The strength of British forces in India was not great. And the Indian Army, though the Commander in Chief had great personal influence with it, could not fairly be expected to prove a reliable instrument for maintaining public order in conditions tantamount to civil war. One thing was quite certain viz., that we could not put back the clock and introduce a period of firm British rule. Neither the military nor the administrative machine in India was any longer capable of this.[30]

During 1946, the Indian Army staged a military exercise to practise internal security duties, including the use of minimum force, the rules for the use of lethal force and the anticipated moments to assume martial law and when to relinquish it to civilian authorities. Although it was a long established practice, civilian administrators seemed unfamiliar with their duties and reluctant to use their powers.[31] At the end of the year, Wavell wrote in his journal on 31 December 1946:

> The administration has declined, and the machine at the Centre is hardly working at all now, my [Indian] ministers are too busy with politics. And while the British are still legally and morally responsible for what happens in India, we have lost nearly all power to control events; we are simply running on the momentum of our previous prestige. The loyalty of the Police is doubtful in some of the Provinces, they are tinged with communalism; fortunately the Indian Army seems unaffected so far, but it can hardly remain so indefinitely, if communal tension continues'.[32]

Attlee believed that Wavell had lost confidence in the ability to make the transfer at all and he appointed Viscount Mountbatten, the former commander in chief of forces in Southeast Asia, as his replacement in February 1947. The British government had decided that Indian independence must be fixed for June 1948 at the latest. Attlee instructed Mountbatten that the 'definite objective' of the government was 'to obtain a unitary Government for British India and the Indian States, if possible within the British Commonwealth, through the medium of a Constituent Assembly'.[33] He was to use his powers of persuasion to get all parties to work together for this end. Yet, despite a relentless charm offensive, Mountbatten was unable to get any agreement. The Cabinet reported in May 1947 that: 'the refusal of the Muslim League to participate in the work of the Constituent assembly destroyed any possibility that the Cabinet Mission Plan [outlined above] could be successfully put into effect'.[34] There was 'no prospect of a Union of India'. Nevertheless, Attlee drew attention to 'the difficulties and dangers necessarily inherent in any scheme of partition [since] the situation in many parts of India was already highly inflammable'. The Cabinet was aware that there was a significant risk of bloodshed in the Punjab, and the Sikh community would be divided, although it was hoped their participation in the Boundary Commission would reduce the unrest. The Prime Minister also acknowledged the logistical and administrative complexity of dividing the Indian Army between the successor states, as well as partition of trade, finance, and industry. The government was concerned that India would choose to leave the Commonwealth, although Pakistan would likely stay within it. Nevertheless, the government would go ahead and grant India dominion status in the ~~short term~~ as the means to transfer power legitimately and constitutionally into the hands of the Indian leadership.

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[30] 'India: Constitutional Position, Cabinet Conclusions', 10 Dec 1946, CAB 128/8, TNA.

[31] Rob Johnson, 'Military Aid to the Civil Power: The Army in India and Internal Security', in *The Indian Army, 1939–1947*, edited by Alan Jefferies and Patrick Rose (London: Ashgate, 2012)~~.~~

[32] Penderel Moon, ed., *Wavell: The Viceroy's Journal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 402.

[33] Clement Attlee's Minute to the Secretary of State for India, 18 March 1947, L/PJ/10/79, IOR. See also the Prime Minister's plan in January 1947 emphasizing the need to have a Constituent Assembly decide on the basis of self-determination the character of the new government of India. Cabinet, Indian Policy, Memorandum by the Prime Minister, Top Secret, 4 January 1947, CAB 129/16, TNA.

Transition also required a degree of continuity, and it was the request of all Indian parties that the British leave European officers within the new armies of India and Pakistan 'to assist in carrying out the division of the army between the new States and building up effective military organisations on a fresh basis'. The government noted that this would be impossible if the two countries became republics. Granting dominion status in the ~~short term~~ to an interim government could solve the problem, since full independence could come *after* the transfer of power to this interim authority. At the same time, the India office would cease to be and the King would divest himself of the title 'Emperor of India'.

The Prime Minister told the Cabinet that 'communal feeling in India was now intense' and that serious disorders could break out as soon as the plan to partition India was announced. Attlee relayed Mountbatten's view that 'the only hope of checking widespread communal warfare was to suppress the first signs of it promptly and ruthlessly, using for this purpose all the force required, including tanks and aircraft, and giving full publicity throughout India to the action taken and the reasons for it'. The Cabinet approved the judgement, assuring the Viceroy that he 'had the support of His Majesty's Government'.[35] The Prime Minister drew up a memorandum detailing that, in the event that Mountbatten's final attempt at getting agreement on an Indian Union failing, he was to announce to the Indian party leaders the government's intention to accept partition.[36] The intention was to 'thrust upon the Indians the responsibility for deciding whether or not India shall be divided and in what way. Based on self-determination, it was fully expected that a bifurcated Muslim state, split between the northwest and Bengal, would be the result. In common with other parts of the British Empire, many in government hoped that the economic demands for cooperation between the new states would force them to work towards some sort of federation.

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[34] Cabinet 50 (47), 23 May 1947, CAB/128/10, TNA.

[35] Cabinet 50 (47), 23 May 1947, CAB/128/10, TNA.

[36] Cabinet, Indian Policy, Memorandum by the Prime Minister, 22 May 1947, CAB 129/19, TNA.

Nevertheless, in June, Mountbatten announced that the date of the transfer of power would be brought forward from June 1948 to August 1947, barely three months away. He made a public appeal for 'a reasonable measure of goodwill between the communities'.[37] Admitting that he had failed to get agreement for the Cabinet Mission Plan of 1946, he believed the only alternative to coercing Indians into a single state was partition. He stressed his desire to avoid worsening the plight of the Sikhs of the Punjab by involving them in the boundary commission and expressed his view that he could not wait until the Constituent assemblies had completed their work on the details of the transfer. Instead, everything was to be 'transferred many months earlier than the most optimistic of us thought possible, and at the same time leave it to the people of British India to decide for themselves on their future'.[38]

The communist left took a keen interest in the partition, popular protest, and particularly the fate of the Indian Army. In a classic conspiracy theory, the Soviet *Red Star* paper reported that: 'the new British plan is nothing but an attempt to retain India as an important integral part of the British Empire. The chief economic positions still remain in British hands—the railways, marine transport, the port economy, irrigation systems, finances, the basic part of the jute industry, almost the whole mining industry'. In a deft reversal of Marxist theory, the author asserted: 'the defence of economic positions and interests is not possible without political power', but added, in order to show the British were exercising continuity in their imperialism, 'That power will be secured in the person of the capitalists, landowners and businessmen who are dependent upon British capital'.[39] There was in fact little chance that Britain would remain in control of Indian infrastructure or industry, and while the proportion of trade between the new states and Britain remained healthy for several years, South Asian countries gradually shifted their share increasingly towards other countries. If there was an accusation of bad faith to be answered, it was over the British desire to protect minority interests. The accelerated timetable for withdrawal meant the hasty abandonment of these sections, including the Sikhs of the Punjab. Furthermore, the Princely States were advised to choose either the new India or Pakistan. Those that delayed their decision, such as Kashmir and Hyderabad were unceremoniously invaded in 1948.

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[37] Cabinet, Broadcast by Viceroy, CAB 21/2038/2, TNA.

[38] Cabinet, Broadcast by Viceroy, CAB 21/2038/2, TNA.

[39] *Red Star*, 31 July 1947, FO 371/63567, TNA.

By far the most depressing episode of the entire transfer was the severe loss of life in the Punjab and Bengal. Increased rivalry between the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League had fuelled communalism to a pathological degree in some provinces. Fears and rumours stoked the antagonism, and when the partition was implemented in the autumn 1947, panic caused a flight by communities who realized they would be on the wrong side of the border. Gangs rushed in to seize land or to avenge themselves against the rival community, and news of deaths inflicted by one side merely encouraged the other to take reprisals. Most scholars assert that around half a million were killed during the widespread violence of partition. Five million refugees passed into India and approximately the same number fled to Pakistan, with some twelve million left homeless. Alan Flack of the ~~ICS~~ wrote: 'Lots of people here are depressed and miserable about the transfer of power. The whole show is now so utterly corrupt that the educated classes feel that it can't go on. The Punjab is an absolute inferno and is still going strong. Thousands have been murdered . . . '.[40] V. P. Menon, a former member of the ~~v~~iceroy's Council, took it upon himself to ask Mountbatten to return to Delhi and become Chairman of an Emergency Committee.[41] Mountbatten was energy personified: organizing guards of local politicians, deploying units to the worst affected areas, sending out medical units, and attaching security forces to trains and refugee convoys. Indeed, the crisis meant that Mountbatten ignored constitutional arrangements and issued instructions as a quasi-military commander. He also established and tactfully chaired a Joint Defence Committee between India and Pakistan, which did much to allay fears on both sides, and ultimately prevented a war breaking out.

While the Indian Army was tasked to provide security as best it could across the country, in the Punjab, where the worst unrest was anticipated, the Indian ~~G~~overnment set up the Punjab Boundary Force (PBF) in May 1947. Its personnel were drawn from Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh backgrounds, led by Asian and European officers. Daniel Marston, who researched this force, believes that the PBF managed to remain impartial in the majority of cases where communal violence had broken out.[42] There were, admittedly, a few incidents in Lahore and Amritsar, where the violence was at its worst, but, on the whole, soldiers and officers from the different communities remained cohesive and focused on their mission.[43] The press at the time was highly critical of the PBF because it seemed they did nothing to prevent the shocking and large-scale massacres taking place, but such a small force was overwhelmed by the extent of the fighting. Furthermore, Marston argues that the collapse of the police force and civil administration in the province deprived the PBF of the intelligence about the problems and likely conflicts in specific districts. PBF units were therefore often operating 'blind', unable to prevent conflict between the most militant parts of each community, and forced to react, which meant supporting the evacuation of the many refugees. General Sir Frank Messervy, General Officer Commanding Northern Command, advised military units to gather their own intelligence: 'civil intelligence . . . breaks down completely in the rural areas where the trouble starts. The military intelligence net is now being established. . . . [T]he details are not yet fully worked out but it is ideal to have one reliable agent on every patrol. . . . [T]roops must also gather intelligence.'[44]

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[40] Cited in Royle, *Last Days of the Raj*, p. 245.

[41] Royle, *Last Days of the Raj*, p. 256.

[42] Daniel Marston, 'The Indian Army, Partition and the Punjab Boundary Force, 1945–47', *War in History* 16, no. 4 (2009): pp. 469–505.

[43] Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (London: Viking, 2000); Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Ian Talbot, *Divided Cities: Partition and Its Aftermath in Lahore and Amritsar, 1947–1957* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

One Indian officer, Brigadier Candeth, attributed the problem to a simple lack of manpower. He recalled:

> Our job mainly was to see that these attacks [on columns of refugees] didn't take place and, by and large, once we got sufficient troops into the Punjab we were able to control it and to some extent we stopped or minimized the number of incidents that took place. You couldn't stop it entirely because the trains were easy targets.[45]

Most Indian units were undergoing reorganization, that is dividing up or disbanding, at precisely the moment the violence broke out. Some units were simply unable to get to areas of disorder because they had no transport or insufficient fuel. The fact that the Punjab had been the preferred recruiting ground of the Indian Army for generations, and especially during the war, meant that a large number of men conducting the killings had military experience.[46]

The British succeeded in stage-managing the final phase of their departure, both in India and in Pakistan, with dignified parades, but while Britain fulfilled its national interests, the massacres of transition meant they had not achieved the lasting goodwill they had hoped for. Moreover, having to divide the Indian Army, including the Gurkhas (half of which remained in British service), was felt to be tantamount to betrayal. British military and civilian personnel had mixed feelings about the transition from India, summed up as bewilderment at the speed of the process, weariness, fatalism and professional indifference, a sense of abandonment of Indian personnel, but also affection, and pride.

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[44] Major General Pete Rees, [Commander Punjab Boundary Force] 'Some Remarks on the Disturbances in the Punjab', March 1947, Rees papers, file 50, IOR cited in Marston, 'The Indian Army, Partition and the Punjab Boundary Force', p. 487.

[45] Cited in Royle, *Last Days of the Raj*, p. 249.

[46] Robin Jeffrey, 'The Punjab Boundary Force and the Problem of Order, August 1947', *Modern Asian Studies* 8, no. 4 (1974): pp. 491–520; Swarna Aiyar, 'August Anarchy: The Partition Massacres in Punjab, 1947', *South Asia* 18 (1995): pp. 13–36.

Surprise at the suddenness of the ending was a typical, almost universal feeling. Olaf Caroe, a former army officer and the last Governor of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), felt the handover had been ‘much too hurried. We were at the centre of a vast typhoon which was going on all around us, but of which we [in the relatively peaceful NWFP] were curiously unaware at the time’.[47] Most British military personnel were busy and there was little time for reflection until much later—and by then it was all over. Robin Latimer, a civilian administrator, stated: ‘One didn’t have much time to brood about independence . . . some said “Don’t go!” . . . Even allowing for being polite, they seemed really not to want us to leave’.[48] Part of the reason for this was Indian anxiety about their personal safety, since the British had provided the security forces. To accord with the directive that India was approaching independence and had responsibility for security, and to avoid unnecessary casualties, some British units were confined to their barracks where, depending on their location, they unofficially sheltered Hindu or Muslim fugitives. All expressed a sense of shock at the scale and ferocity of the communal massacres taking place around them. Lieutenant D. J. McCaskill, 1st ~~Bn,~~ Lancashire Fusiliers, at Lucknow came to believe the British Army had been ‘not so much holding the Empire together as keeping the Muslims and Hindus apart’. He felt compelled to add a justification, which was phrased as an imperial achievement:

> I don’t feel Britain has too much to be ashamed of. There were so many different cultures and religions in India that only a third party could keep any peace between them. The British have their faults—who hasn’t—but we must have had something going for us since the huge sub-continent remained a single unit while we were there, and only splintered into fragments of its once glorious self after we left . . . .

Many of the British personnel expressed a sense of exhaustion, the result of the high tempo of the war years and then the preparation for the handover of power which began almost immediately. Lieutenant General Reginald Savory, the Adjutant-General of the Indian Army, felt frustration that: ‘we were leaving a job half finished. Our intention in India was to hand over a running show and I believe that if we could have held on for another ten years that would have been the case. But the will was lacking.’[49] Auchinleck had informed Mountbatten that the task of dividing up the army would take three years, but it was not until June 1947 that a committee for the 'Reconstitution of the Armed Forces of India' was set up, and Mountbatten wanted the division of the army complete by August.[50] Ian Stephens, whose father and grandfather had been military men and who lived in India, believed that a sense of disillusionment was widespread because: 'much of what they'd served for seemed to be breaking up, and they pulled out, fatigued, [to] rebuild their lives'. David Symington, a civilian, also noted the soldiers were 'very tired and pretty browned off with the political failure'.[51] Although many of the officers wanted to stay, they felt they couldn't choose between a Hindu-led or a Muslim-led government. Leaving was accepted with fatalism: some were glad to go home to see friends and families again and 'get some rest', some left without any feelings at all—just looking forward to another posting, whilst others subsequently became nostalgic for the environment.

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[47] ~~Allen,~~ *Plain Tales*, p. 255.

[48] Robin Neillands, *Fighting Retreat: The British Empire, 1947–97* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1996), pp. 105–6.

[49] General Savory, letter, 28 June 1947, Savory Papers, National Army Museum (NAM); Allen, *Plain Tales*, p. 257.

The sense of abandonment of Indian soldiers was particularly difficult for British officers of the Indian Army to bear since it impinged directly on their sense of honour and loyalty. Rupert Mayne, of Mayne's Horse, drove past great columns of refugees passing in opposite directions between Amritsar and Lahore. A former soldier of 4th Indian Division stepped out of the line, stood to attention and explained that he had fought through North Africa and Italy, and then asked for help. Mayne was unable to help him. He replied: 'Your politicians asked for *swaraj*, and this is *swaraj*'.[52] Yet, senior officers were aware that some former soldiers were leading the murder gangs and General Messervy advised that pensioners should be informed their pensions would be stopped if they were found participating in the violence.

~~Lt~~ J. P. Cross, 1st/1st Gurkha Rifles, was angry that his unit had received no instructions on the handover 'until the last minute'. Despite promises that the battalion would transfer into British Army service, it transpired that it would not: 'The Gurkhas could not understand it; nor could we. We were left without positive directions and therefore could give none. Pressures of events obscured the heartbreak, . . . there was no properly planned handover to the Indian officers. They never came until after the bitter end. And [referring to the massacres] the end was bitter.' He continued:

> However fine the motive behind the act of pulling out, where men meant more than ciphers and numbers, it hurt. Those who have never served in a tight knit community like a Gurkha battalion can have little idea of the wealth of camaraderie and warmth of human relationship that exists between officers and men. Nothing really made sense and it was a heartless and painful experience. . . . on parting, tears were shed and the sorrow was genuine and hard to bear. . . . [I was]

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[50] Marston, 'The Indian Army, Partition, and the Punjab Boundary Force', p. 485.

[51] Allen, *Plain Tales*, p. 258.

[52] Allen, *Plain Tales*, p. 257.

> indignant at the unseemly haste of having to meet an unrealistic political deadline. We were abandoning our men, we had broken trust and, by God, it hurt.

One officer believed the breaking up of the Indian Army ruined all that had been achieved and gave an equally emotional response:

> to us it was the heartbreak of heartbreaks. We felt it beyond credence. We had united these dozens of different castes, creeds, colours, and beliefs under one flag. We had united them under one regimental colour. It took us two hundred years to build that up, and for that to go literally at the stroke of a pen—it was something that one will never get over.[53]

Field Marshall Claude Auchinleck, the Commander in Chief in India, wrote:

> All Indian Army officers hated the idea but we did as we were told. They had to be split . . . which meant that regiments like my own, half Hindu and half Moslem, were just torn in half—and they wept on each others' shoulders when it happened . . . you felt your life's work would be finished when what you had been working at all along was just torn in two pieces.[54]

This feeling that partition was a disaster and 'horrifying' was reinforced by the communal killing and the sense that the unification of India, which the British regarded as one of their key achievements, had been destroyed.

The assessment of scholars is that the British faced an impossible dilemma, and that they lacked the means or the authority to enforce their will in the final years of the Raj. Robert Holland believes that Mountbatten recognized the inevitability of withdrawal and got the task finished.[55] After years of 'constitution-mongering', his achievement was to implement the transfer of power. Where he failed was in persuading Jinnah and Nehru to avoid partition, and there is a widespread belief that he rushed the whole process, leaving too little time for negotiations which had the effect of increasing the urgency, desperation, and violence. The view was widespread at the time. Sir George Cunningham, the Governor of the North West Frontier Province, wrote: 'the opinion of most sensible people out here [is] that the trouble was enormously aggravated by the speed at which everything was done'.[56] An alternative view is that Britain achieved its national interests. John Darwin concludes that Mountbatten kept the new states in the Commonwealth, satisfied American demands and thus preserved much needed financial support, ameliorated the criticisms of the Muslim world which kept them aligned against the Soviet Union, and prevented both the new states of India and Pakistan falling to communism.[57] Moreover, Britain managed to ensure India continued with its loan repayments although, as noted above, India no longer represented a large share of Britain's trade. Indian commentators believed the British were responsible for partition, and had deliberately set Muslims against Hindus. However, while the Cabinet records and the correspondence of Mountbatten suggest the British felt responsible for the breakdown of law and order, they no longer had the power to prevent it. After the failure of the Cripps Mission (1942–45) and the Cabinet Plan of 1946, they had nothing left to offer, and, other than seizing the initiative with the idea of partition and the date of the final transfer of power, could only react to events.

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[53] Allen, *Plain Tales*, p. 252.

[54] Allen, *Plain Tales*, p. 252.

[55] R. F. Holland, *European Decolonization: An Introductory Survey* (London: Macmillan, 1985).

[56] Royle, *Last Days of the Raj*, pp. 245–6.

[57] Darwin, *Britain and Decolonization*.

Almost all the testimonies of military personnel reflect with pride their service in India. The Somerset Light Infantry was the last regiment to leave India and they did so with dignity in a final parade on the quayside at Bombay. Major Freddie de Butts commanded the Guard of Honour at the end and wrote that whilst the Indians cheered, some also wept. He felt the parade had somehow encapsulated: 'the affection and admiration of India, not only for the British soldier, but for the whole British race and tradition of empire'. This might appear to be a bold, even outrageous claim but for his final remark, which seems curiously apt: 'never can an occupying army have had such a send off'.[58] Auchinleck was more critical, believing those in Britain, in contrast to those had *served* in the subcontinent, had *used* India: 'The English never cared, the politicians especially. I don't think they ever took any interest at all'.[59] Ed Brown, a soldier of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, captured a mood about the British Empire that was more typical of attitudes at home. He felt that at the back of the 'Jewel in the Crown' there was 'squalor, hunger, filth, disease and beggary. Only when I came out of the army could I see what a terrible thing it was that a country had been allowed to exist like this. Such snobbery, so many riches, so much starvation'.[60]

The process of British transition out of India and Pakistan consisted of setting clear objectives in line with national interests but was very much tempered by what was practical and realistic. When it was evident that Britain could no longer broker agreement between the Indian factions, nor expect to assert its authority over the Indian leaders, Mountbatten got approval to accelerate the timetable for withdrawal. The perception of British administrators and military officers working in India at the time and many others since has been that the speed of transfer was too rapid and created its own dynamic of instability. Some scholars nevertheless assert that British leaders had no choice and that, in order to preserve their own national strategic interests, they had to bring forward the transfer of power, partition, and the division of the Indian Army. While criticized for permitting the violence of Calcutta, the

[58] Neillands, *Fighting Retreat*, p. 113.
[59] Allen, *Plain Tales*, p. 260.
[60] Allen, *Plain Tales*, p. 260.

Punjab, and Bengal, the range and scale of problems were beyond the capacity of the British to tackle them. At the tactical level, Brigadier R. C. B. Bristow, who took part in the operations to quell unrest in the Punjab in August 1947, believed the Army had the aspiration to fulfil its duty of aid to the civil power, but was faced by a situation beyond its control. He concluded: 'the normal internal security role of the army was to support the civil power in maintaining law and order, but we faced a crisis in which the civil power was ineffective, law and order had completely broken down, and the reliability of the troops varied'.[61] The collusion of many police units in the communal violence in 1947 meant the army was deprived of crucial intelligence and found itself reacting to events. Insufficient manpower meant it was spread too thin and communications were often inadequate. Despite this, and on-going reorganization which created widespread uncertainty, the cohesion of the Indian Army remained intact. Many British officers praised the Indian troops for their impartiality and professionalism in the face of severe provocation, including ambushes and attacks by armed police.

The role of armies in countering insurgency is to destroy and isolate insurgent groups, create the political space and time for conflict resolution negotiations to succeed, and de-escalate the violence in order to return as efficiently as possible to civilian control. One Foreign and Commonwealth Office official recently described the approach of the joint military–civil effort as: 'Fight, Build, Talk, and Commit'. The 'fight' component reinforces the idea that every state must possess a monopoly of violence, control its borders and territorial space, and have the ability to impose sanctions to ensure compliance with the law. States need also to ensure they enjoy the consent of the population, that there is a viable economy and that they can 'build' and sustain local institutions. States need to ensure, through 'talks', that they offer a more attractive benefit than the insurgents, that they understand the needs of the people and they offer representation, equality before the law, equality of opportunity, and both civil and legal rights that protect the individual. State authorities need to 'commit' to long-term projects, to the maintenance of good government and the welfare of the people as part of the 'social contract' between citizen and state. In the event of insurgency, states also have to take account of the dynamics of local 'agency', including the experiences, perceptions, beliefs, and values amongst the aggrieved population. In the case of the transition of India, the British government knew which of these criteria it could and could not ensure. When the balance of consent tipped against them, they chose not to engage in a protracted counter-insurgency, but they sanctioned a robust 'fight' component to prevent civil war, inter-state war, and further mass murders. They attempted to 'build' new institutions, having trained leaders in the public services, they engaged in 'talks' to find the best and most acceptable solutions and they committed to a timetable for withdrawal, the enduring partnership of the Commonwealth, on-going commercial and financial links, and even permitted British officers to stay on and assist in the early development of the new Indian Army and the Pakistan Army. They refused to take a partisan position and remained even-handed to both states, upheld the international legal standards of the day and withdrew as they had pledged to do.

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[61] Bristow, *Memories*, p. 164 cited in Marston, 'The Indian Army, Partition and the Punjab Boundary Force', p. 505.

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