

## The Legacy of Partition, 1947–2009

Additional Notes to the Exhibition, March 2009

**Panel 4. The Partition of the Punjab: Disaster Compounded. Part One: migration from Pakistan to India**

**Panel 5. The Partition of the Punjab: Disaster Compounded. Part Two: migration from India to Pakistan**

*Sir Reginald Coupland on the lack of realism in partitioning the Punjab (1943)*

Of the six million Sikhs in all India, 3.8 million are domiciled in the Punjab and 1.4 [million] in the Punjab States. This is only about 15 per cent of the aggregate population of the Province and the States, and there is not a single district of the Province in which the Sikhs are in a clear majority... the Sikhs are more concerned with their position in North–West India than in India as a whole, and it is the prospect of a Muslim, not of a Hindu Raj that alarms. Their reaction to Pakistan as conceived by the Muslim League is the exact counterpart of the Muslims' reaction to a union of India as conceived by the Congress... It seems probable, in fact, that rather allow themselves to become a minority in an independent Muslim State, the Sikhs would insist on their own right of self-determination...

It would seem, therefore, to meet the needs of the case if the Province were divided into two roughly equal parts by a line drawn from north to south through the Central Division. But to determine exactly where that line should run is far from easy. The two principal cities of the Punjab – Lahore, the administrative capital, and Amritsar, the commercial capital and sacred city of the Sikhs – are both situated in the middle of the Province between the rivers Ravi and Beas and only thirty–five miles distant from each other... Between the two cities there is no natural dividing line of any kind. Any boundary set between them would be wholly artificial, geographically, ethnographically and economically... it would cut in two the system of canals on which the productive capacity of the whole area largely depends...

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### *Sir Reginald Coupland on the impracticality of a large-scale transfer of the population (1943)*

...Partition, it is claimed, will solve the minority problem throughout India as nothing else can. It adopts the 'balance theory' in a form in which alone it can be valid. Muslim States are balanced against one or more Hindu States to which, whatever their size, they are equal in national status. There will be minorities in them all. It would be better, no doubt, if they could be communally homogeneous. A wholesale exchange of population between the Muslim and Hindu States would be highly desirable if it were practicable, but, as will be explained later on, it is not. Some transfer, no doubt, would be possible. It is proposed, as will be seen, to separate certain predominantly Hindu districts from the Punjab and Bengal; and Hindus and Muslims living near but on the wrong side of any of the frontiers might be encouraged and assisted or even in the last resort compelled to migrate...

If frontiers can be shifted, so, with more or less hardship, can people. The compulsory exchange of Greek and Turkish populations in 1923-4 under the auspices of the League of Nations has often been cited as an example of a method of dealing with a minority problem which, harsh as it is for the existing generation, offers a better prospect than any other method of peace and happiness in the future... But it must not be supposed that the minority-problem in India could be eased by this method to anything like the same extent as it might be eased in small European countries... a separate so complete is quite impossible. Numbers and distance alike forbid it. Mass-transfer would involve not hundreds of thousands but millions or tens of millions, and in many cases it would mean an unbearable change of climate and of all the ways of life which climate has dictated. Nor would it bring about in India, as it would in the Balkans, the union of homogeneous folk. The transferred multitudes would find themselves among people of a different stock, speaking a language they could not understand...

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### *Lord Mountbatten's Protestations on the Use of Force and the Need for More Troops in the Countryside*

On the night of 17–18 May 1947, Mountbatten informed Sir Evan Jenkins, the governor of the Punjab that he had received the Indian Cabinet's approval for 'the use of maximum force at the earliest possible moment (including air bombing if necessary) if there should be any outbreaks of violence; and I shall support you up to the hilt in whatever measures you consider to take in this direction, as it is vital that they very first attempt at communal war should be utterly and ruthlessly crushed...' He repeated the remark in his Viceroy's report of 23 May to the British Government: the Indian Cabinet had 'agreed that we should also bomb and machine gun them from the air, and thus prove conclusively that communal war was not going to pay'. Mountbatten seems either to have deluded himself or not to have got his facts straight about the realism of bombing and strafing disturbances from the air. On 16 August, Sir Claude Auchinleck, the Supreme Commander, noted that there might be extra flights 'if necessary for psychological purposes. There was no question of using these aircraft for bombing and machine-gunning...' because of the difficulty in identifying the real perpetrators of violence from the air and the risk of killing innocent civilians. The only response to violence on the ground that was thought likely to be effective was to deploy troops.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See the documents in Lord Mountbatten's Protestations that Armed Force would be available to contain the breakdown of order at the time of Partition among the downloadable teaching resources on the Record Office website.

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The reality was that the violence in the Punjab was both an urban and a rural phenomenon; of the two, the rural violence was felt to be much more difficult to contain. In his report on the Punjab Boundary Force to the Viceroy on 12 August, Sir Evan Jenkins commented:

The Commander, Punjab Boundary Force, has a most difficult task. The population of the twelve districts in which he is operating is close on 14.5 million, and this population is distributed over 17,932 inhabited towns and villages. When the possibility of the enforcement of the Boundary award was first discussed, I estimated that we should need at least two Divisions of full strength and on a war footing, i.e. a minimum of about 20,000 fighting men. The effective strength of the PBF is at present about 7,500, or including static troops and training centres about 9,000. Now that the Police are definitely unreliable in Lahore and Amritsar, the troops have a rapidly increasing responsibility. Neither the railways nor the main roads are safe, and the village raiding is quite impossible to control without a very great display of force. Firepower is really less important than numbers. Until 1946 I do not think that we had ever experienced in India any large communal upheaval outside the cities – the Mopla rebellion is perhaps an exception to this general statement. The lesson of the 1947 disturbances in the Punjab is that once the interlocked communities begin to fight all over the countryside, the only remedy is to employ a very large number of troops. I should say that the Amritsar district could at the moment do with two full-strength Brigades in addition to the old Police force. It has in fact one weak brigade and a Police force which has largely disintegrated.

At its greatest strength, the Punjab Boundary Force was in a position to allot four men to every three villages or fewer than two men to a square mile; to the population, it stood in a ratio of 1:630.<sup>2</sup> From 1 September, the two governments of Pakistan and India took over the military responsibilities of the disbanded Punjab Boundary Force and announced

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<sup>2</sup> Notes on the Boundary Force among the downloadable teaching resources on the Record Office website.

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that ‘all the powers of the Government will be used in full force against the law breakers. In particular, armed bands will be captured and put into concentration camps. Bands caught in the act of committing crime will be shot at sight... Refugee camps will be protected by military guards in whom they have confidence; Muslim refugee camps by Muslim troops and non-Muslim refugee camps by non-Muslim troops. The same policy will be followed in the matters of escorts. No obstruction of any kind in the movement of refugees will be tolerated.’

### *The Debate over the Numbers Killed in the Migration Process*

Alan Campbell-Johnson, Mountbatten’s press attaché, was one of those who argued for a low estimate of those killed. ‘Claims have been made that about 500,000 people died during Partition. It was nothing of that sort. I was part of the Emergency Committee set up to monitor the situation, and let me say here that most of the violence took place in a period of two and a half months, during which time about 200,000 people were killed. There are noted historians who agree with the same figure.’<sup>3</sup> According to Sir Penderel Moon, 60,000 Hindus and Sikhs were killed in West Punjab and twice as many (120,000) Muslims in East Punjab. This estimate is too low. Justice G. D. Kholsa claimed that at least 500,000 died, of whom 200,000 to 250,000 were Hindus and Sikhs. He admitted that more Muslims were killed in East Punjab than Hindus and Sikhs in West Punjab.

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<sup>3</sup> Alan Campbell-Johnson’s testimony is among the downloadable teaching resources on the Record Office website.

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There are others, however, who were also in a position to know the realities in the summer of 1947 and who placed their estimates much higher. Lt-General (rtd.) Aftab Ahmad Khan who served in the Punjab Boundary Force and then in the Pakistani force that along with Indian units escorted refugee convoys across the border, claimed in a letter to the historian Ishtiaq Ahmed that at least 500,000 Muslims lost their lives. Ahmed himself has carried out interviews on both sides of the Punjab border. 'There is no doubt that many more Muslims lost their lives [he estimates that about half a million Muslims died]. Between 700,000 and 800,000 Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs perished altogether. That year the monsoons were also in a bloody mood. A large number of deaths was the result of cholera, dysentery, malaria and typhoid which plagued the refugee camps and the caravans on the move.'<sup>4</sup> A recent study of mortality in the Punjab and the process of religious homogenization lends credence to the higher estimates.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Consult The Battle for Lahore and Amritsar and other essays by Ishtiaq Ahmed among the downloadable teaching resources on the Record Office website.

<sup>5</sup> K. Hill, W. Seltzer, S. J. Malik, S. S. Russell, 'The demographic impact of Partition in the Punjab in 1947', *Population Studies*, 62/2 (2008), 155-170.