
Two decades after Partition, the geographer Aloys Michel sought the insights of the last governor of undivided Punjab, Evan Jenkins, on the arrangements made by the departing British. Jenkins responded: “If you ever delve more deeply into the political and administrative aspects of the Transfer of Power, it is as well to remember that almost everyone concerned has an axe to grind. The truth will no doubt prevail ‘when none cares whether it prevail or not,’ and some historian is able to examine both the official records and the Indian newspapers of the time” (letter to Aloys Michel, dated 27 November 1967; Private Papers of Evan Jenkins, British Library, D807). In Shameful Flight, historian Stanley Wolpert revisits the official record, as presented in the twelve bound volumes entitled The Transfer of Power, 1942–7, and concludes that ten more months of negotiations among the Indian National Congress, the Muslim League, and the British might well have rendered the division of the subcontinent unnecessary.

Rarely do historians admit to having been incorrect in their previous analyses, especially after two decades of scholarly research. In Jinnah of Pakistan (Oxford, 1984), Wolpert had credited Muhammad Ali Jinnah with having “conjured” Pakistan “into statehood by the force of his indomitable will” (vii). But in Shameful Flight, Wolpert admits that he had underestimated the “monumental importance of Mountbatten’s negativity towards Jinnah” (10) while doing his research. However, in the introduction to this otherwise carefully researched and well-written work, Wolpert goes against some of the arguments presented in the rest of his book.

In the main chapters, Wolpert traces the intricate negotiations between the key actors of this complex drama and argues that it was Mountbatten’s emphasis on speed that killed the possibility of a united India. In the introduction he veers toward his old thesis, arguing that if Gandhi or Jinnah had “been willing to subordinate his own ambitions to the leadership of the other” (4), India might not have been divided. Were Gandhi and Jinnah ever entirely in control of their respective constituencies, however, one may define them? Revisionist scholarship has questioned the capacity of both leaders to influence their following. Shahid Amin has described how peasants imbued their own meanings onto the dictates and prescriptions of the Gandhi-led Congress, thereby subverting and transforming them, and Ayesha Jalal has revealed the brittle and fragile quality of alliances that tied Jinnah to Muslim politicians in the Punjab and Bengal. Undoubtedly major leaders, neither Gandhi nor Jinnah possessed the magical powers of absolute obedience that Wolpert’s construction endows them with. By 1947, if not earlier, the power to determine the fortunes and contours of India had fallen onto the hands of a different set of rulers and the ruled. Wolpert also reiterates his old argument that Jinnah and Gandhi never agreed on the “best tactics” to win Indian independence. According to him, Jinnah hoped to win India’s freedom “by his brilliant mastery of secular Western law and parliamentary rules of governance” while Gandhi considered “Jinnah’s old-fashioned liberal appeals to Britain’s Parliament, or to viceregal sympathy, a waste of energy and time” (3). If this was the case, why did Gandhi participate in the Round Table Conferences and repeatedly seek appointments with various viceroys throughout three decades of public life in India? Finally, a fundamental error in chronology is evident in the comment “Jinnah’s hope of becoming the first Indian viceroy dissolved in the deadly fire that turned Amritsar’s garden into a national morgue and monument” (4). The possibility of Jinnah becoming Governor General of Pakistan dated to 1947, not the time of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in Amritsar in 1919!

The ten chapters of the book closely correspond, in chronological order, with the Transfer of Power volumes. One of the strengths of the book is its juxtaposition of global events with
politics in India. The chapters narrate the progress of the Cripps mission that was set into motion by the fall of Singapore; the failure of Gandhi’s Quit India Movement of August 1942; the grasping of every fissure in the anticolonial movement by Tory party leaders in Britain—“If we can keep [India] for ten years I am convinced we can keep her for good” (57); the alarming progress of famine in Bengal; and deteriorating relations between Churchill and Wavell, the viceroy. Wolpert takes the reader beyond Churchill’s iconic status as leader of the Allied forces to a reckoning of his position as inveterate enemy of any progress on the question of Indian independence. His engagement with the proposals presented by various top-ranking British officials in India opens up the space for his insistence that only Mountbatten, who made his dramatic appearance as the last viceroy in March 1947, was in a hurry to end all negotiations and leave India in a triumphal exit. This unseemly haste is significant because both Commander-in-Chief Auchinleck and Wavell had warned of the real possibility of civil war breaking out if a negotiated settlement was not put in place. The official printed record has secret memoranda with breakdown plans drafted in 1945 and Auchinleck’s insistence that the British Indian Army could not be divided between India and Pakistan in such a brief space of time in the summer of 1947. These are grist to the historian’s mill that Partition violence was not inevitable. Mountbatten’s responsibility for Partition violence can no longer be denied.

However, the later chapters on Partition violence do not discuss the 1946 election results in Punjab or the Direct Action led by the Muslim League in January 1947. Without these, it is difficult to understand why Attlee’s Declaration of February 1947 that resolved to transfer power by June of 1948 led to immediate rioting in the Punjab. Although alluding to the debates over the imposition of martial law, Wolpert does not mention the Punjab Boundary Force, which had a brief and pathetic tenure from 4 to 31 August 1947. The final chapter touches on the problem of Kashmir and civil war faced by the young governments of India and Pakistan. Wolpert’s treatment reinforces the now well-accepted connection between Partition and some of South Asia’s most enduring problems that has also been made by Gyanesh Kudaisya and Tan Tai Yong. Shameful Flight presents a strong suit in favor of British responsibility for Partition and deserves to be read widely.

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The dropping of the atomic bombs and the Japanese surrender did not signal the end of the Second World War in Asia. Instead, between 1945 and 1949, South and Southeast Asia were engulfed in an era of violent decolonization marked by civil wars, anticolonial freedom movements, communist-led guerilla insurrections, and intercommunal massacres. These “Forgotten Wars,” which threatened European occupation of Asia, have largely been ignored by the historiography both of the Second World War and of decolonization in Asia. Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper’s Forgotten Wars: Freedom and Revolution in Southeast Asia redresses these gaps by innovatively reintegrating comparative histories of the birth of Asian nation-states with that of decolonization and the onset of Cold War politics in the region.

Set against the backdrop of postwar Asia and spanning the geographical crescent from Bengal and Burma, down to the Indonesian archipelago, Forgotten Wars critically examines British-led efforts to regain European imperial control of the region, and the challenges from regional nationalist and communist groups that contested such efforts. In 1946, Asia, under colonial rule, be it under British, Dutch, or French, was “a connected arc of protest” (190), as local nationalists in India, Indonesia, Malay, and Burma looked to one another