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The Troubling Interval 1945-1950
Two states created and two nations destroyed (Part Two)\(^1\)

Abstract

As men dressed in impeccable white tweeds and equally impeccable white silks, topi and Shalwar Kamin, paraded in the government palaces in New Delhi in 1947, little did one realise that they were planning one of the biggest butcheries in human history. Historians on all sides consciously or unconsciously become part of the blaming game and very interestingly none of them speak of genocide. Most probably to maintain a false sense of respectability to their work or argument. The reality was that two nations were destroyed, Punjab and Bengal. Of the two, Punjab was structurally always kept separate from the 1840s onwards. What happened in 1946 and 1947 was that, the nation within a nation, the Sikh nation was temporarily neutralized at the cost of hundreds of thousands killed and millions scarred for life. The Punjab and Sikh conflict was bound to surface sooner or later because Sikhs, 5% of the population controlling a 95% Muslim population was bound to cause an upheaval, especially in a democratic structure. What was more, the Sikhs were ethnically different from the rest of the population. Here the problem was that a period of peaceful transition was denied, as millions were uprooted within a couple of months of notice. What was even more tragic and by all definition criminal was the systematic destruction of the Bengali nation. Although there were both

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\(^1\) Methodology: I realised from earlier research effort that, documents coming out of British India often possessed a coded language, use of phrases that could mean something and it’s opposite. What is interesting is that the best of both Indian and British historians continue to avoid what to us might seem evident, always focusing on the officialised narrative instead. As much as it is possible I have tried to avoid the official and semi-official narrative from all sides. If possible I have deliberately tried to gather evidence from sources outside this perimeter. This sometimes has meant that I had to put my faith, as a historian, in the columns of newspapers far removed from the centre of gravity, those papers that more or less concentrated on putting forward simple facts to their readers, avoiding imposing opinions. Most of these journals brought home the essential mood of things as they unravelled. I have no doubt that for an attentive researcher, these journals are a boon, when one has access to them. Armed with these modest sources I will try to sketch the ABCs of India’s history. I hope the reader will be able to make-up his or her own mind on the validity of my propositions.

\(^2\) Typical dress of Afghanistan, especially Pashtun areas. During the independence movement it was brought to prominence by leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru.
Hindus and Muslims in this community, both in their big majority were ethnically Bengali. Religion was only a small fraction of their collective identity. Only a few decades earlier a plan by the Brits to divide this nation was crushed because all the Bengalis united behind the integrity of their nation. As historians, what is interesting for us to observe is that even after 1947 this policy continued under Pandit Nehru as Prime Minister. What had started as a plan in the 1840s was in large part completed in the 1940s and 1950s. Whether this was in the interest of the rest of India, it is difficult to say. But what historians can acknowledge is that part of Indian leaders, at the highest level, did participate in the systematic dismantling of the Bengali nation. They are therefore responsible for the bloodshed that resulted directly from their actions.

Keywords: India; British-India; Pakistan; Bengal; Bangladesh; Hinduism; Congress; Gandhi; Bose; Nehru; Vallabhai; Brahmanism;

In the previous number of the journal – Öt Kontinens / Five Continents, in my essay: The Troubling Interval 1945–1950 (Part One), I demonstrated that a small group of co-operators from north-western part of India, led by M.K. Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, consolidate their powerbase by systematically eliminating all opposition from other parts of British India and the independent states of India. What comes through is that the so called „independence struggle” was in reality a licenced violence, political-maneouvring, procedural trickery and a game of tactical elimination and having nothing to do with independence struggle as we know it in other contexts. I also suggested that certain leaders of the independence movement, namely Nehru and Gandhi, were probably „nurtured” by the British imperialists as a replacement for an unscheduled independence of the dominion. It was therefore natural and normal that „co-operation” was what took place between future leaders of India and the departing imperial authorities.

In this part, my main aim is to see how far Clement Attlee’s responsibility was engaged in the tragedy. And to see if the above mentioned system of co-operation extended into the partitioning of the Indian Empire, into India and Pakistan and the structural adjustments beyond that. Given the haphazard manner in which it was conducted, decisions taken without necessary control on the ground and the urgency with which the whole process was conducted, completely ignoring the hither to preached doctrines of non-violence, all point to complete amateurism on the part of the departing imperial authorities. But the British are adamant of their
good faith that their part of the agreement was kept until the final hours of their responsibility. The „independencers” on the other hand are categorical that they were innocent in their dealings, but the imperial authorities left them in a helpless and hopeless situation. In this face-saving exercise it seems both sides have honourable explanations, with historians on both sides providing „substantiated” arguments. So as things are presented the dead have themselves to blame; and even here no one really knows how many, since at the time no one really cared. According to the much respected BBC and the mouth-piece of the British Empire: „In a couple of months in the summer of 1947, a million people were slaughtered on both sides in the religious rioting.”

The killing fields really began in 1946 and went well into 1948. Not so long ago, The New Yorker Magazine, in a review of the British historian William Dalrymple’s ‘The Great Divide’, wrote the following: „By 1948, as the great migration drew to a close, more than fifteen million people had been uprooted, and between one and two million were dead. The comparison with the (Nazi) death camps is not so far-fetched as it may seem.”

Ironically speaking at a public event a few months after the partition Lord Mountbatten tried to paint a different picture, as one newspaper reported: „Lord Mountbatten, unveiling a portrait of the Indian Prime Minister, Mr. Nehru, at India House today, said that 97 per cent of the people of India were living peacefully in their new-found freedom. The massacres had been bad enough, but he predicted that the final casualty figures would be a small fraction of the large figures which had been quoted.”

The official line of protective narrative in favour of Nehru was initiated, and since perpetrated.

The Indian and British historiographies are at odds with each on almost all accounts, and there will be no convergence of opinion on this matter in the distant horizon. One slight exception might be

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Bishwa Mohan Pandey who makes the following statement: “The vivisection of the Indian subcontinent has been an issue of lively debate since 15 August 1947, when it was thrust upon ‘the people’ by the elites – alien and indigenous. What is noteworthy, is that this debate – academic and non-academic – is still inconclusive and seems to remain so in the near future.” Pandey lands right in the vicinity of objectivity but very quickly jumps back into the classical structure of accusing “colonialism” for everything that is wrong with the way the country evolved under British Rule, when he continues: “However, the colonial regime perceived immediately the inherent danger in the emerging secular nationalism. Therefore, it began to protect and promote the communalism among the Muslims and the Hindus. In this way, the nationalism had to struggle against the colonialism and communism as well.” What a pity that Pandey fails to detect real nationalism in a landscape of political banditry, political opportunism and outright ideological bigotry. According to Pandey the grand strategy of the colonials was to oppose secular nationalism with that of communalism. But later he goes on to saying that the Brits did not create anything new, they were basing their strategy on the existing structures of division: “They have exploited the complex Indian socio-cultural history to reinforce the theory of a permanent and unbridgeable communal divide.” How bridgeable were the castes and communities over thousands of years? Colonialism and communal divisions were invented by the Mesopotamian Brahmins and used as a strategy of “divide and rule” in the Indian Subcontinent. This said Pandey comes close to giving us an accurate picture when he says that historians on the British side follow the same one sided approach to writing the history of British Rule in India: “With few ‘exceptions,’ these committed ideologies support the colonial policies blindly and at times ahistorically and illogically. The entire intellectual effort has been sharply pointed at defending the rise and fulfilment of the British rule.” What Pandey forgets to see and analyse is that the British perspective on Indian history is surely an exercise of denial but at the same time it

6 Bishwa Mohan PANDEY: Historiography of India’s Partition – An analysis of Imperialist Writings, Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi, 2003, 1.
7 Ibid, 2003, page 2
8 Ibid, 2003, page 1–2
10 Ibid, 3.
legitimises the "protected" Indian elite of British India. What we have to agree upon is that the British historians were indeed adjusting their perspectives to the needs of the British Empire. But what is more important is that a positive portrayal of people like Gandhi, Nehru and Jinnah was part of that empire-biased narrative. The British historians, and foreign academics were the first to legitimise, epitomise and monopolise the agenda of history writing in favour of Gandhi and Nehru tandem.

Pandey puts a very interesting postulate to partial waste because he comes back to a conclusion on the issue that falls into the established, well-oiled manner of seeing the events that led to partition: "Undoubtedly, the colonial regime played an important role in the partition of India. The imperial ideologies have been conscious of the blunders committed by the British-policy makers. Therefore, they have been busy in the 'face-saving and white washing' exercise." One thing that seems to come out of this valuable insight is that when it comes to Indian historians, most of them do not want to say certain things aloud. This is one of the reasons why even the most talented of them sometimes look like jugglers of a truth that they are unwilling to foster. It is in a sense of self-censure, before they are officially rebuked or reprimanded. In the land of living gods this is very much understandable, but we have to make a slow start on the right path. Let it be that Pandey is right that the British are partially or even two-thirds responsible for the partition. Let us concentrate on the one-third responsibility. Who were these local people that have blood on their hands, since no one is in doubt about the actual bloodbath, a bloodbath that mainly involved two age-old communities - the Bengalis and the Punjabis. We have to decide to move into a new paradigm, a new matrix of analysis, with a new set of parameters and assumptions. An impasse has surfaced and it has to be over-come.

In short, it is time we introduced appropriate terminology into the debate and cut out the slogan phraseology. If we do not want to see things as the British historians, as the insightful work demonstrates, then we have to stop using their terminology. Their "nationalists", in the Pandey vision of things cannot be ours. The freedom fighters of their "choice" cannot be ours. Their preferential "elite" in no way can

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11Ibid, 3.
be that of an independent minded historian, the one that the likes of Pandey are waiting to see. Their heroes and saints for India cannot be ours. Their priorities in the narrative cannot be ours, the independent-minded historians. The empire-biased dialectic has to be replaced by something more appropriate, if not adequate. If the empire and its historiographic assets extol certain aspects of our past, then let us avoid the same by investigating the reasons why the British favoured, reinterpreted or out-righted created certain elements of what has become the accepted narrative. In the process we might find authentic historical supports, long distorted, disguised or destroyed by the British historiography. We have to make a tectonic shift towards a radically new configuration. How gigantic an effort this will prove to be, it is difficult to say. But in my thinking there is no doubt that we have to do this for the sake of our profession as historians, for the future generations, and we have to do this for the sake of those millions of Bengalis and Punjabis that perished in the name of someone else’s freedom, through human-imposed famine and partition. My attempt here will be to put forward a perspective that demands more introspection on the part of the Indian community of historians as well as those abroad who are in one way or the other related to this effort of clarity. Most of the time, taking a different view is a physical challenge in some environment. The task is even greater when one wants to question the status-quo and bring in some light into the misty assumptions that take us nowhere in the understanding of India’s history. I do not for a moment pretend that the direction I am taking is the right one but it is my sincere conviction that we have to keep searching for answers.

As we dig deep into the logic of each of the parties involved, we will come to a temporary conclusion that the lives of the people, especially those living in Bengal was the last of the concerns of the „independencing” community. Attlee and Nehru had their own agendas, in which human catastrophe became a logical whole. If Churchill and Nehru have to bare the blame for the death of millions of Bengalis during the 1944 famine, then the estimated figure of two million deaths related to the „Partition of India” should logically be shared by Clement Attlee and Jawaharlal Nehru. The picture was often smudged and distorted concerning the contribution of Mohamed Ali Jinnah to the build-up towards the precipice. People
often forget the fact that it was Gandhi’s extremism that led to the creation of the Muslim League and treat its creation as a factor of division and the final partitioning of British India. The reality on the ground was that Jinnah was constantly forced to adapt his position to the whims and wishes of M.K. Gandhi. A calendar of catastrophe was imposed upon him and progressively he was transformed into a scapegoat. In whatever perspective one looks at and tries to understand the problem, Mohamed Ali Jinnah, with evidence available and the logical build-up of the circumstances, seems to be outside this perimeter of blame, as he and his supporters were opposed to the division of Punjab and Bengal and had little to gain from this eventuality; they knew well what would happen but had few means to stop it. There are many things that Jinnah and the Muslim League could be blamed for, but not the 1946–48 genocide.

After the final meeting on the proposed partition of India, Mohamed Ali Jinnah made following declaration: “We must concentrate all our energies to see that the transfer of power is effected in a peaceful and orderly manner.” He feared that the largely scattered population of Muslims, especially in small rural towns, would become a victim of attacks, where it would be difficult to protect them. The key actors are therefore Clement Attlee, the Labour Prime Minister of Britain, Jawaharlal Nehru, interim Prime Minister of the newly created Indian Dominion and M.K. Gandhi, the spiritual asset of all sides included. With the documental evidence available, one could easily say that the priorities at home and abroad dictated the colonial agenda of Clement Attlee, but this should not mean that Gandhi and Nehru were a passive participants to this deal.

Clement Attlee had a socialist agenda for Britain’s post-war transformation, highly expected by his public after the general elections in 1945, but he had two acrobatic duties to accomplish before he could even dream of thinking of a state-funded social revolution. He had to redress a badly indebted and economically dysfunctional Britain. The war effort had over-stretched all its capacities to funding the armed forces, and this situation was not

about to change with the end of the war. The promise of decolonisation, agreed under the Atlantic Charter and the eventual creation of the United Nations Organisation, had put into motion aspirations of freedom and independence across the British Empire which was dispersed across the globe. Another reality of Britain’s role in Europe during and after the war was that massive land armies became the norm with the build-up of huge Red Army regiments at the door of Western Europe. And as the war came to an end, Britain was faced with a task much greater than that of the war against the Axis. This was a huge economic burden. Added to this, contrary to its expectations, Gandhis here and there were no longer a guarantee for peaceful departure of Britain from its colonial engagements. In the war against the Axis, Britain could count on the resources of its colonies, dominions and those of a benevolent United States, and now this was about to change; tacit or forced cooperation during the war had now turned into open rebellion in the colonies, an atmosphere of civil war reigned in whole swathes of the British Empire. As for the help from the United States it would be far-fetched to ask for aid to settle the matters of the British Empire, and as we will see Britain after the war was a deep pit, where financial resources disappeared very quickly.

Most of the historians dealing with the subcontinent of the 1940s fail to take fully into account the fact that British policy towards India went through radical changes. Churchill wanted to retain India’s position in the British Empire but Attlee wanted to set India free as soon as possible. In the previous government, in which Attlee was an accommodating member, Churchill’s view was that Britain’s colonies have to be maintained at all costs, because without its colonies Britain’s position in the world would weaken too quickly. The war effort had demonstrated that the colonies had played a key role in winning the war. But the situation had evolved, as mentioned earlier the potential risks emanating from the colonies after the war was directly putting in danger the “home base” of Britain. This was exactly the base from which Clement Attlee had derived his legitimacy. Clemet Attlee was a man in the shadows during the war, managing the home front, making tough decisions when needed. Now the dilemma was clear to him and his cabinet, especially Ernest Bevin, his foreign secretary: save British power overseas or rebuild British power at home, on new foundations. Never being an
imperialist at heart or of ideological conviction, the Labour government made the decision to make a new start at home and abroad. Every effort had to go into giving Britain a competitive industrial capacity which can absorb the demographic surpluses resulting from demobilisation and decolonisation after the war. In the eyes of the British public and the trade unions it was increasingly difficult to justify the increasingly costly empire abroad. Empire had become a time-bomb in every sense, at its height empire was the backbone of Britain’s power, now as Attlee saw it, it could become a trap that would engulf Britain and put it at the same level as Portugal or Mongolia, after they lost their empire. The system of wartime rationing, for example, was maintained even after the war and extended to most of the basic consumer products. What was more depressing to the population was that even this was jeopardised because the United Kingdom was fast exhausting the $3.750 billion loan given to it by the United States of America, at the end of the Second World War. The American senate having its own budgetary preoccupations in Eastern Asia and elsewhere, might not be so willing to extend further help. Let us not forget that the planned Marshall Plan became effective only in late spring of 1948, in which Britain became one of the main beneficiaries.

On the very day that India was “accorded” independence Lord Brand presented an over-arching survey of the British Economic Crisis to the House of Lords. In the survey the noble Lord presented the government two economic steps to take (the speech was reproduced integrally in the Sydney Morning Herald): The overseas expenditure of 175 million sterling had to be drastically reduced. The other action being that of cutting imports and increasing Britain’s exports. The noble lord concluded the presentation of his survey by this dire conclusion: “I do not think that we can possibly be expected immediately to increase our exports by hundreds of millions of pounds on the wrong side caused by the extra prices in imports. The terms of trade have been very greatly against us in the last year.” In other words, the verdict from the world of industry and finance was evident: retreat

from empire without delay. The noble lord painted a dire picture, if his advice was not heeded to in time, this is what will happen: „We
must recognise – and here I speak from knowledge of American conditions\textsuperscript{14} - that Congress probably may not be in time before the critical moment arrives for us. We ought, therefore, to prepare now, since the main burden in any case must fall on us. We cannot afford to run down either stocks of food or raw materials or our general reserves of dollars or gold below the danger point, so that the time may come when we are absolutely defenceless and simply rest on the succour of other nations without any means whatever of helping ourselves.”\textsuperscript{15} Lord Brand in his analysis goes on to hinting that Britain could face an inflationary pressure similar to that faced by some countries in continental Europe during the 1920s. The option was black and white: get out of all colonial quagmires, cut down on all none essentials, and protect the only chance of survival - the home base. There was no time for endless parliamentary debates or committee hearings or any form of hesitation. No time equally for endless sequences of negotiations with colonial partners or co-operators. There was a sense of urgency and the time had come for quick action.

It is also very symptomatic that on the day of transfer of power to Nehru by imperial Britain, Winston Churchill, as leader of the opposition, took to the BBC to transmit the following message to the British people in which he, „warned the nation that a lower standard of living, hunger, and the dispersal or death of a large proportion of the population, faced the people if they submitted to ‘totalitarian compulsion and regimentation.’”\textsuperscript{16} Winston Churchill was referring to the fact that Attlee’s government had introduced industrial conscription and half a million Brits were preparing to emigrate to Australia, New Zealand and the United States. Churchill even urges his people to remain and fight, evoking the spirit of Dunkirk. This warning comes under the


\textsuperscript{15} Lord Brand (Managing director of Lazard Bros. and Co. bankers): British Banker’s Survey Of Economic Crisis, The Sydney Morning Herald, August 15, 1947, op.cit.

backdrop of bread rationing which began end of July, 1946.17 A measure that was avoided even in the difficult years of world war. Things were getting desperate in the British Isles. The danger of total disintegration of Britain was real.

Clement Attlee wasted no time in heeding to the warnings of Lord Brand, one prominent American newspaper wrote the following in its columns: “The announcement that food purchases have been suspended completely followed a statement by Prime Minister Attlee that Britain was cutting food imports at the rate of $48,000,000 a month”.18 In a lead article, Irvine Douglas, the London correspondent of the Sydney Morning Herald, took the liberty to write the following on what was, not long ago, an empire on which the sun never set: “Austerity is a slow poison. The British people have had seven years of it. Perhaps that is why they do not realise fully the gravity of the situation that will face them when the supply of dollars runs out in a few months’ time.”19 The reader should be alerted to the fact that this article appeared on the 16th August 1947, meaning that it was probably drafted one day earlier, on the same day as India got its independence – handover to Nehru. The situation in Britain was only slightly better than the famine devastated and soon to be dismembered Bengal. From Clement Attlee’s point of view, the stakes were high and decisions had to be taken in haste without it being seen as such. This goes to show that from May 16, 1946 to the period of departure from its possessions in the Sub Continent, Britain was sliding towards its own precipice. With public discontent and industrial action from the unions, the atmosphere was one of impending catastrophe.

To be fair to the British Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, we have to take into account two important qualities to have a good appreciation of his intentions. First of all unlike Churchill, Attlee was

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a man of sincerity and possessed a sense of ethics, a quality which did not necessarily clash with his quality of being a man of action. The second quality was that he was a very practically man, he managed Britain during times of war, he possessed a sense of responsibility and foresight, always tilting towards fair solutions to problems, knowing well that this will spare him trouble in the future. These qualities have to be appreciated in their real value if we are to understand Britain’s official stance towards India during the period 1945-1948. Sensing that things under the previous period had not yielded expected results, Attlee had changed the whole hierarchy in order to make a fresh start. The Viceroy and the Secretary of State for India were replaced along with new priorities of speed and swiftness on the agenda. When he took over as Prime Minister on August the 3rd 1945, Britain was in deep economic trouble but he was willing to give a space of time to solve the stalemate in the constitutional status of India, or the evolution of it. The earlier efforts had not showed a way out. In his final attempt Attlee proposes a solution which could have spared much bloodshed and communal agony.

In his White Paper on India, presented to the British Parliament on the 16th of May 1946 Clement Attlee makes the following historic statement that sometimes goes unmentioned: „We ourselves are also convinced that any solution which involves a radical partition of the Punjab and Bengal, as this would do, would be contrary to the wishes and interests of a very large proportion of the inhabitants of these provinces. Bengal and Punjab each has its own common language and a long history and tradition. ... We have therefore been forced to the conclusion that neither a larger nor a smaller sovereign State of Pakistan would provide an acceptable solution for the communal problem.” What is more interesting, and which shows the sheer honesty of the British Prime Minister, is that he brushes aside religion and takes a “linguistic” and civilizational approach, especially in consideration of the province of Bengal. He

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was against partition and as we go along we will realise that he was the only one, among the people involved, who was really opposed to this eventuality, because he knew what this in reality would mean, terrible bloodshed and sufferance.

To avoid the partition of the Subcontinent, Attlee puts forward a plan for a loose federation, to give a breathing space for rationality and the realistic aspirations of the people. His idea was to devise a system by which both Punjab and Bengal would become strong federal entities, allowing all parties to let the steam out, before starting a strong process of integration at a later period when things would have calmed down. In presenting his plan for a new constitutional arrangement in the House of Commons, Clement Attlee made the following statement: „We are therefore unable to advise the British Government that the power which at present resides in British hands should be handed over to two entirely separate sovereign States.”

Repeatedly, Attlee was warning the Indian leaders that they should choose a peaceful and constitutional solution and avoid fanatical orientations or solutions orientated by that.

The day after the Prime Minister of Britain, Clement Attlee, presented his White Paper on India, Lord Pethick-Lawrence (Secretary of State for India) gave a press conference where he gave an insight into how things would unfold on the ground. According to him the details were made clear to the Indian leaders. The correspondent of the Glasgow Herald wrote the following on that event: „On the position of the British troops, Lord Petick-Lawrence said that if the constitution as framed by Indians was for complete independence outside the British Commonwealth one of the first things to happen would be the immediate withdrawal of British troops, except on the possible assumption that some arrangement would be made, which would be entirely in the hands of Indians. … Someone, however, must be responsible for law and order in the country. They were anxious to hand over that responsibility, in so far as it remained with them, at the earliest possible opportunity to a fully constituted Indian Government.”

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22 Ibid.

year before the actual partition took place, the British authorities, at
the highest level, made it very clear, the options that were available
to the Indian leaders and what the consequences would be if they
did not take the right steps. Britain would immediately withdraw all
its armed forces from India, if the Indian leaders refused the multi-
level federal arrangements in the freshly proposed constitution. No
one in their right mind would want to be mixed up in a civil-war in a
country with a population of 400 million and with literally hundreds
of national communities. A few days later the governor-general,
Lord Wavell at the occasion of talks on the form of interim
government should take, repeated the same message and added that
British paramountcy would not be transferred to anyone, it would be
annulled. As the Australian Associated Press reports: „The
memorandum made clear that once a new and fully independent
Government or Governments were created in British India, Britain would
be unable to force the Administration to carry out the obligations of
paramountcy. British troops would not be retained in India to force these
obligations on any future Indian Government or Governments.”
Lord Wavell’s warning was very clear, if you choose a violent and bloody
option to settle your petty quarrels, do not count on British Armed
forces to keep order. In the same statement he also advised his
Indian partners to take the responsibilities without delay, no time
should be lost. In other words, the British Government and its
representation in India were openly telling the Indian leaders to „administratively” take over the country, while leaving enough time
for political negotiations where the Indian community can continue
in a more relaxed atmosphere. The Congress Party, in particular by
using delaying tactics, wasted many valuable months of preparation.

As the call for constitutional arrangement of May 16, 1946 came to
nothing and partition became evident, the British Government was
obliged to set strict deadlines for departure, but even this evolved as
the situation became tight elsewhere. In early 1947 the British Prime
Minister, Clement Attlee was giving himself ample time to solve the
Indian problem. In a declaration in the House of Commons he stated
the following: „His Majesty’s Government wish to make it clear that it is

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24 A. A. P: Proposals for India – Viceroy Talks to Hindus, The Sydney Morning
Herald, May 24, 1946, available online: https://news.google.com/newspapers?
id=cedjAAAAIBAJ&sjid=x5MDAAAIBAJ&pg=7231%2C2840104 (16-01-2017).
their definite intention to take the necessary steps to effect the transference of power into responsible Indian hands by a date not later than June, 1948.” Then the plans were revised down by eight months by October 1947. Then the plan adjusted again, the calendar was adjusted bring forward the date of August 15, 1947, because, as explained earlier, the situation at home and abroad was deteriorating rapidly. The situation in Persia and the Middle-East was becoming extremely preoccupying for the British authorities over there. As explained earlier the catastrophic picture painted by Lord Brand in the middle of August 1947 was already on the rails much earlier, reports coming from all directions had created an extreme sense of panic in the British echelons.

The reason why the British authorities kept stressing the fact that the British troops will be out was that the resources for maintaining them were running out. The cuts in the armed forces were planned and the deadlines had to be kept. The Sydney Morning Herald reported the following on the 11th of August 1947: „The reduction, owing to the economic crisis, of Britain’s armed forces to 1,007,000 men was less than the War Office expected and it is significant that the cut of 80,000 men in the original estimate is accounted for largely by the evacuation of British battalions from Japan-Australians taking over their duties- the coming evacuation of 60,000 troops from India and the evacuation (expected to be completed in November) of a final batch of 3,000 men from Burma.” The priority of the British Government had turned to the Middle East because of two reasons: strategic concerns and Jewish terrorism. This had a direct impact on the security and order issues in India. Strategically, Britain still needed to keep open the Suez Canal, Egypt had taken the issue to the United Nations and there were uncertainties looming over the issue. Another strategic issue was the Trans Jordanian oil pipelines. Persia was itself engaged in skirmishes with Azerbaijan putting in danger the pre-war Anglo-

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Russian order in that region. This would jeopardise vital oil supplies. But given the scale of the economic crisis at home, Britain was reassessing even this issue. As the Sydney Morning Herald reminds: “The concentration of British Middle East forces possibly in Transjordania – strategically placed for the defence of the oil pipeline- is now under the urgent consideration of the Minister for Defence.”

27 The disintegration of British power between the year 1946 and 1948 was happening at an amazing pace. This strategic unravelling was coupled with the battle for Palestine. By the middle of 1946 coordinated Jewish armed activity was erupting in which along with the Palestinians the main victims were the British armed personnel, in a lot of cases officers and high ranking military hierarchy. Brits were regularly kidnapped and murdered without remorse. 28 There was intense criticism of Attlee Government because it deployed 80,000 soldiers in Palestine for policing. 29 But the sight of dead soldiers being brought back home would have had an even more devastating effect on the British public. Protesting against the wish of the World Jewish Congress and the US that more Jews be allowed to settle one newspaper had the following reaction: “Everything serves to underline the truth of Mr. Bevin’s words last week, when he declared that if a further 100,000 Jews were admitted to Palestine another division of British troops would be required to keep order there – a commitment which, he added, his Government was not prepared to accept.” 30 Starting from around 10,000 British troops stationed in Palestine, the number rose to 100,000 after the Second World War. 31 And there seemed no end to the problem. All the reorganisation effort made the Middle East a priority leaving India and Asia a distant

27 Ibid.
29 SMH Staff correspondent: What Britain’s Army Cuts Mean to Australia, The Sydney Morning Herald, August 11, 1947, op.cit.
31 There is a lot of data collected at this website: British Forces in Palestine. It is rich in data and anecdote. The reader should be alerted to the fact that although true it might not be data certified by an official authority. Available: http://www.britishforcesinpalestine.org/whothere.html (14-01-2017).
concern. On 14th November 1947, the First Sea Lord, Lord Hall, told a
press conference „that the Royal Navy had been reduced from a peak of
850,000 men in 1945 to 180,000 on October 1, 1947. By March, 1948, it
would probably be reduced to 147,000 … After reorganisation, the strength of
the Mediterranean Fleet would be as much as at present, and the Home Fleet
would be almost as strong as before reorganisation.” 32 Navy is essential to
the future of Britain as a European power and land armies were
considered increasingly as non-essential. Wherever possible authority
and responsibility was swiftly handed over to the locals: „The Egyptian
Army is to be increased by 55,000 to a total strength of 100,000 in the next
six months, and will take over British depots, stores, and equipment to enable
it to meet the greater responsibilities in which the withdrawal of British
troops will involve it.” 33 In every corner of the British Empire and
protectorates was, „…the transfer to the Dominions of primary
responsibility for the defence of their own areas” 34 From the early months
of 1946 this was the name of the game, from the shores of occupied
Japan to the coast of Egypt, everyone knew this and the British
Government made the message loud and clear. It was reported in July
1946 that the only Indian Peer in the House of Lords, Baroon Aroon
Kumar Sinha, had „declared that the position in India was critical, but he
knew that the people of India at last felt that Great Britain meant to carry out
her pledged word.” 35 From this perspective it would be a historical error
to blame the British Government of Clement Attlee for the Great
Indian Genocide. They said that the British army would not be there to
protect anyone. The immediate responsibility for the genocide
therefore comes from other quarters.

32 Australian Associated Press: Severe Cuts In Strength of Royal Navy, The
33 Correspondent of the Sydney Morning Herald: New Role for Egypt’s Little Army,
34 Editorial: No More Leaning on Britain, The Sydney Morning Herald, June 22, 1946,
35 The Sydney Morning Herald: Indian Peer Hopeful, July 19, 1946, available
online: https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=wExAAAAIBAJ&sjid=Co8MAAAAIBAJ&pg=2336%2C4726275 (20-01-2017).
The Indian “freedom fighting” community made huge blunders in not taking Attlee for his word, unlike Churchill he was not playing a game of poker with them. Their brinkmanship was going to be their trap, but not for all. As we will see later Gandhi and Nehru were engineering towards a precipitous withdrawal of Britain from India. They did not wish for a settled withdrawal, they wanted to avoid a situation where the “confederal” form of constitution is legitimised. And when the moment arrived everyone could pretend to be surprised. It is interesting that after the final phase of negotiations, Mohamed Ali Jinnah is the only person to react as if it was the first time he came across the latest plan for the division of both Punjab and Bengal. At least some of the details were new to him, which made him state the following after the June 3, 1947 meeting, one month before the Cyril Radcliffe started to put the final touches in the Border Commission: “The plan has got to be carefully examined in its pros and cons before a final decision can be taken.”

Jinnah even says that the process of partition should be orderly and carefully planned.

On the part of Jawaharlal Nehru the temperament is markedly different, showing a feeling that he was aware of it and more importantly he had made up his mind, even before consulting his Congress colleagues: “It is with no joy in my heart that I commend these proposals, but I am convinced that our decision is right.” And goes on to concluding: “It may be that in this way we shall reach a United India sooner than otherwise, and that she will have a stronger and more secure foundation.”

This is a very enigmatic comment coming from a man who presided over the vivisection of the subcontinent. He implies that he somehow possessed a grand strategy, in which everything would be broken-up and put back together at a later date. Or he was contemplating the fact that almost 40% of new territory would be acquired by British India as the kings and princes were forced to abdicate. Interestingly, as early as June 1946 after being arrested at the border of the Kingdom of Kashmir he revealed his intentions to the reporters of Reuters: “Pandit Nehru, commenting yesterday on his

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37 Ibid.
experiences in Kashmir, said that he did not consider himself an outsider in any Indian State. “The whole of India is my home, and I claim the right to go to any part,” he added. (When he arrived in Kashmir last week he was detained for two days for defying a ban on his presence and for persisting in trying to reach Srinagar.) He knew already what he was going to do when power was transferred. Let us not forget that his arrest in Kashmir took place on the 23rd of 1946. One year before Radcliffe had arrived in India to draw the actual borders. His plans were prepared well before they actually took place.

Lord Pethick-Lawrence, the Secretary of State for India, had some valuable advice for the Indian leaders: “Union cannot be by force,” said Lord Pethick-Lawrence. „It must be by agreement, and it will be the task of the Constituent Assembly to obtain that agreement, which will be possible if majority and minority alike are tolerant and prepared to cooperate for the good of all India.” He in his clairvoyance had seen, heard and felt what was going on in the official parlours in New Delhi. It was not so easy to heed to this common sense. In 1942 Walter Lipmann, the American writer and reporter, in a syndicated article, wrote the following about the dilemmas waiting the Indian leaders: „The problem of India is how the separate peoples of India can be both independent and united. This is a problem which the separate peoples of Europe have never been able to solve, though they are politically more experienced than the Indians. No one has ever found a way to give the peoples of Europe self-determination and independence and at the same time to unite them in one European commonwealth.” India was a land of many languages, communities and more importantly a country of many races. Many mistakenly think that the British were holding power by putting religious communities one against another. This was only superciliously true. There were other reasons which superseded religious identities, but the scope of this essay is limited.


and therefore it would not be appropriate to start a new debate here. However, it has to be reminded that the pull of identities was getting stronger by the day. Walter Lipmann adds: “For once it was certain that Britain was going, and going fairly soon, a terrific struggle was bound to ensue as to whether the Congress party Hindus were to rule all of India. The stakes are tremendous. The stakes are an empire. And Gandhi’s demand that his party be granted immediately the control of the war-time government of all of India is the one way in which a Hindu empire might be established and consolidated.” The academic debate on the freedom movement does not contextualise the struggle. Walter Lipmann, who took a keen interest in India pointed out as early as 1930s and later in 1942 what was at stake. He got his analysis perfectly right.

The struggle was not to free India or the Indian people, the struggle was to know who would get the consolidated empire. Neither was it a struggle against the British, first it was about who would co-govern India with the British and later when the British decided to leave, the mighty quarrel was about in whose hands the falling apple should land. Those who are perceptive enough should see the minutes and declarations of the annual meetings of the Congress movement. It was always a wish list for more jobs for the North-West Indian elite. Nothing more. Gandhi and Nehru’s biggest asset was the support they received from the British, it was not the support they received from the people. This was a fact that they had to live with and capitalise on. Both knew too well that as soon as the British leave, this support would more or less vanish overnight. Nehru and Gandhi had a common direction but their agendas varied in depth and in momentum.

In the final years of the partition the tension between Nehru and Gandhi was visible. Gandhi was a Gujarati, who believed in empires where his own people, mighty traders, could have unlimited access; all his life he supported the British Empire, because it was a guarantee of power and prosperity to his community. Hinduism was his weapon and instrument through which he consolidate this community’s hold on the British Indian Empire, which in itself belonged to a much larger world empire – the British Empire. The trading communities which supported him all the way through knew what they wanted. In this sense, Gandhi was in the avant-

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41 Ibid.
garde of the „world-system“ logic and thinking, he was neither an Indian patriot nor an Indian nationalist. Nehru was Persian-Afghan-Kashmiri descent, who from childhood was groomed to be a leader. He was more parochial in his ambitions, and had more pressing urge to govern than Gandhi. While Gandhi, coming from the peripherals of the Mesopotamian tradition was ever fascinated by great empires, Nehru stayed true to his origin, he craved for something tangible. Power to Nehru meant something totally different to what it meant to M.K. Gandhi. Nehru believed in a temporal vision and exercise of power. In the final years of the Second World War, Churchill and most of the British establishment saw the dangers of Gandhi’s vision to their own standing. Hence onwards, relations with Gandhi are managed tactfully because he is still needed for crowd controlling, but their focus shifts whole-heartedly towards Nehru. As Churchill repeatedly said, Nehru could be used beyond India as well, probably in the whole of Asia if not beyond, an instrument against the expansion of communism. One has to realise that Mohamed Ali Jinnah was a collateral beneficiary to this behind the scenes battle. In this too Churchill made an undeniable contribution, as a way of countering Gandhi’s desires for total empire. Jinnah was introduced into the game but cannot be considered as the main actor. Churchill, Gandhi and Nehru had two things in common, their hatred of the Bengalis and the Great Indian Genocide. This genocide played on from 1942 to 1948 where the three were the main actors. The first part was the Bengal famine that was engineered to wipe-out millions of innocent Bengalis because of an alleged support to Japan. The second part of the genocide is bloodier, although it claimed fewer millions. In this part Churchill takes back stages, which means Nehru and Gandhi remain in the forefront. We have every reason to believe that the Great Indian Genocide of 1946-1948 can be attributed to the tug of war and silent war of attrition between Gandhi and Nehru.

In a historic analysis of the Indian partition and what ensued, we should not talk about countries, instead we should talk about people,

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43 Richard LANGWORTH: „Rascals, etc....“: Churchill & India, richardlangworth.com, 6 June 2012.
of individual responsibility. People make decisions and not countries. Blaming the „British” or the „Indians” takes us nowhere. In this part I have tried to show the responsibility of Clement Attlee in the group of protagonists involved: Attlee, Gandhi and Nehru. I hope to have made an honest and factual demonstration that Clement Attlee’s Government did everything in its means to leave India in an organised manner. It did not give up in its will to leave behind a peaceful and constitutionally harmonious India. Faced with total political annihilation at home, Clement Attlee put all diplomatic and material resources to produce a negotiated constitutional arrangement in India, to protect its people from unwarranted divisions and bloodshed as it often was. Clement Attlee felt that it was the final responsibility of the British Government to have consideration for people of India, he realised in the final hour of British rule in India that people were forgotten. The entire effort of Attlee was to keep a small door open to popular sovereignty, for people’s legitimacy to have its place. For this reason, Clement Attlee failed, but the facts are there for all to witness of his good intentions towards the Indian people. There were secret deals done with Nehru on various issues in an exercise of damage limitation to the interests of his own country, in a moment of unseen magnitude of economic crisis. Attlee’s efforts were countered by two individuals in a matrix of manipulations, hesitations and masquerading abnegations. Nehru and Gandhi knew exactly what was happening in Britain, the economic crisis that was pulverising British power in the world, they knew the urgency that had engulfed the British government. For reasons of their own making they refused to take Clement Attlee’s proposals seriously.

In the next part, third part in the series, I propose to examine Gandhi’s and Nehru’s direct implication and engagement in the Great Indian Genocide. Nehru might have been one of the greatest Prime Ministers of India but this does not mean that his participation and handling of the partition can be brushed aside by blaming others. Wearing impeccable white robes does not mean that they were not stained with traces of blood. No amount of bleach powder and sponsored propaganda can remove these stains. It could be a promising day when historians can show the way forward, so that India can make peace with itself and its past.