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# The Scars of Partition

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*From Ireland to Palestine, the 20th century's partitions promised stability but delivered bloodshed, animosity, and ethnic cleansing. A new book traces how the breakup of the British Indian Empire unleashed a chain of upheavals that redefined South Asia and shaped the modern world.*

LONDON – Whatever comes out of US President Donald Trump's 28-point peace plan for Ukraine, almost certainly drafted with significant input, if not outright authorship, by the Kremlin, one thing seems certain: the United States is now undoubtedly willing to sign off on the forcible partition of Ukraine, regardless of what Ukraine's people want. The points include no references either to Ukraine's constitution or its parliament. Trump is embracing the great power/spheres of influence logic of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

There is, of course, nothing surprising about Putin's neo-imperial frame of mind. In 2014, the journalists Ben Judah and Edward Lucas, writing in *Politico*, reported on a curious exchange between Putin and Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk. Putin reminded Tusk that the western Ukrainian city of Lviv had once been Polish Lwów and then, with his characteristic mix of cynicism and provocation, hinted that perhaps Poland and Russia could "sort it out together" and divide Ukraine between them.

Putin has reportedly made similar suggestions to Romanian and Hungarian officials over the years. As is so often the case with Putin, these remarks were neither spontaneous nor naive. Putin fancies himself a student of history, but with the goal of distorting and rewriting it to serve his own ends.

But partitions of the kind that Trump appears to be embracing are an extremely sensitive subject in Poland, Ukraine, and the rest of Central and Eastern Europe. The first modern Ukrainian state emerged in March 1918, midwifed by Austria, Germany,

and Turkey through the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which carved Ukraine out of the collapsing Russian Empire in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution. Later that year, Poland – newly restored after more than a century of nearly uninterrupted nonexistence following its 18th-century partitions – clashed with the nascent West Ukrainian People's Republic over control of Eastern Galicia, including the industrial city of Lwów, now Lviv.

Amid the chaos of 1918-19, the region's Jews were subjected to horrifying pogroms in which an estimated 100,000 people were murdered, often by their own neighbors, as well as by marauding *soldateska*. Following the Polish-Soviet War of 1920, when the Red Army was only stopped at the Vistula river, Galicia was incorporated into the Second Polish Republic, only to become a slaughterhouse under Hitler's invading Wehrmacht two decades later.

Poland itself reemerged in 1918, more than 120 years after the three late-18th-century partitions that wiped the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth – once Europe's largest state – off the map. The first partition, in 1772, was engineered by Prussian King Frederick II and his Russian counterpart, Empress Catherine II, with the reluctant participation of Austrian Empress Maria Theresa. "*Finis Poloniae"* ("the end of Poland"), Tadeusz Kościuszko, the leader of a doomed 1794 uprising, supposedly said at its end, a year before Frederick and Catherine descended upon the last remnants of Poland like vultures.

Incredibly, it is now the US who appears most intent on partitioning war-torn Ukraine, with Trump urging President Volodymyr Zelensky to cede the entire Donbas region – Ukraine's old industrial heartland – to Russia, including the border areas that months of relentless Russian offensives have failed to capture. Donbas may be flooded, its cities reduced to rubble, and its farmland sown with mines, yet Trump echoes Putin's annexation demands, tying them to his own plans to expand US access to the region's abundant rare-earth minerals.

After each fruitless conversation with Putin, Trump ignored the pleas of America's European allies to support Ukraine, instead berating Zelensky for his alleged lack of realism. In their most recent White House meeting, Trump reportedly tossed

aside the maps Zelensky had brought to show how limited Russia's advances in the Donbas have been. An estimated 100,000 Russian soldiers have died fighting there this year alone.

Zelensky had gone to Washington on his last visit hoping to secure access to American Tomahawk cruise missiles, which Germany would have paid for, but left empty-handed. A proposed summit between Putin and Trump, to be hosted by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in Budapest, was later canceled, granting Putin yet more time to pursue his goal of reviving Great Russia. Now, it seems, Trump is determined to help Putin achieve by diktat what he has not achieved on the battlefield.

**The Unmaking of Empires**

Like "frozen conflicts" or "small wars," partitions are historical phenomena that invite comparison, particularly in terms of the social and psychological wounds they leave. They are a cousin to secessions, though without any democratic input, save the pseudo-referenda which Putin organized in the Donbas, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia. Putin the self-styled historian manipulates these frozen conflicts as if adjusting the burners on a gas stove, turning them up or down at will. But contrary to his rosy assurances, partitions often result in tragedy, as borders drawn by cartographers rarely align with the human realities on the ground.

There is no shortage of examples. The partition of Ireland in 1920 ignited a civil war and decades of violence. A 30-year period of violence remembered, euphemistically, as "the Troubles" ended only in 1998. Likewise, the failed 1947 partition of mandatory Palestine merely ushered in a brutal, unending conflict whose horrors, both in Gaza and the West Bank, have dominated the world's screens and headlines for the past two years.

The division of Cyprus following Turkey's 1974 invasion also remains unresolved, though mercifully dormant. And, of course, there was the bloody disintegration of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. The peaceful "Velvet Divorce" that separated Slovakia and the Czech Republic in 1992 is one of the few exceptions to this otherwise grim pattern.

The 20th century was marked by two great partition waves. The first followed World War I, as four great empires collapsed and large minorities were left stranded on the wrong side of new borders, fueling irredentism and horrific ethnic cleansing, such as the forced uprooting of Greeks and Turks across the Aegean. The second wave brought genocide and mass expulsions, including the extermination of most of Europe's Jews and the forced displacement of 11 million ethnic Germans, creating a brutally "tidier" Eastern Europe. Yet the underlying problem remained: small and medium-size states, tenuously tied to the West, were perpetually menaced by Russian imperialism.

Of all the partitions of the 20th century, none proved more consequential than that of the British Indian Empire in 1947. In his fascinating new book *Shattered Lands*, historian Sam Dalrymple argues that the "Great Partition" of the former British Raj actually consisted of five separate partitions, three of which have been largely forgotten outside the region. Twelve independent states emerged from the mess left by the British as they dithered between imperial and European destinies and struggled to absorb the human backwash of their own clumsy policies.

Dalrymple's narrative covers vast territories, many of which readers would struggle to locate on a map, even though some remain flashpoints today, from Balochistan and Kashmir to Myanmar's Rohingya regions. Against this sweeping backdrop, Dalrymple weaves together the well-known horrors of the 1947 partition, when British India was divided into a secular but Hindu-dominated republic and an Islamic Pakistan, and the lesser-known crises that unfolded across the Raj's farthest reaches, from Aden to Burma.

Dalrymple also traces the fate of the Raj's 565 princely statelets, like Abu Dhabi and Hyderabad, which was as large as South Korea and ruled by the fabulously wealthy Nizam, Mir Osman Ali Khan, once dubbed "the world's richest man." The expulsion of Hyderabad's long-established Arab population was another consequence of those upheavals. At the time, a British Indian passport was required not just in Aden but also in Mandalay and Rangoon, and the rupee was the equivalent of the dollar or sterling.

The fifth and final partition in Dalrymple's narrative is that of Pakistan and Bangladesh in 1971, born of the colonial arrogance of Urdu-speaking elites in then-West Pakistan toward the poorer Bengalis in the east. Of the five partitions, the one Dalrymple touches on only briefly is that of the Gulf, with its volatile mix of Marxists, Nasserites, and sheikhs who, thanks to vast oil and gas reserves, came to rule over some of the world's richest countries and found themselves courted by superpowers. It is, as Dalrymple notes, a region where "Trump, Inc." feels most at home – one where jumbo jets are bestowed as gifts and billions of dollars are funneled into the Trump Organization and investment funds run by Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law.

Drawing on a vast array of archival sources and vivid memoirs – those of Nobel laureate economist Amartya Sen and *Sunday Times* journalist David Holden are especially revealing – Dalrymple crafts a fluent, engaging narrative filled with deft portraits of players great and small. He also delights in quirky details, such as the Nawab of Junagadh's 800 pedigree dogs, each with its own servant, and his unlikely efforts to protect India's last wild lions.

In a welcome departure from the sensationalism that pervades so much of today's writing, horror here is suggested rather than luridly displayed – conveyed, for example, through the image of multicolored quilts trampled into the mud by thousands of people fleeing, as the Raj ended, from friends and neighbors who had turned into murderers. The sheer scale of these mass displacements still beggars belief, as does the intensity of the animosities they unleashed.

Ironically, reconciliation now seems more likely in the mini-markets of Birmingham and East London than in the subcontinent itself, where the vast floodlit fences that separate India and Pakistan, visible even from space, stand as a grim memorial to the Great Partition. And now a similar fence is being erected along the border between India and Myanmar, a fresh scar on the same wounded landscape.

**Partition's Long Shadow**

Such sweeping transformations might be expected to bear the imprint of a master strategist – a South Asian Napoleon or Metternich. Instead, the task fell to the posturing British Viceroy-turned-Governor-General Louis Mountbatten and Cyril

Radcliffe, a lawyer-turned-cartographer who had never been east of Paris. Wholly ignorant of local conditions, Radcliffe drew new borders with astonishing detachment, unaware of how the Empire's 565 independent princely states would choose between India and Pakistan.

All but 13 opted for India. In the large princely states of Kashmir and Hyderabad, rulers made their decisions regardless of their subjects' faith or identity, igniting decades-long conflicts and driving 750,000 people into exile in Pakistan. Radcliffe burned his papers, refused his fee, and left the subcontinent the day he finished his work. British generals stayed behind to command the newly independent armies of India and Pakistan, but did little to stop the massacres and ethnic cleansings that followed.

The division of shared assets was both tragic and absurd: factories cut off from raw materials, volumes of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* split between the two new states, and dictionaries torn in half, with A-K going to India and L-Z to Pakistan. A 4,500-year-old jade necklace was literally sawn apart, its beads divided between the two countries. Religious idols were uprooted, along with their worshippers, and court musicians were left to seek new patrons. An entire service class of Anglo-Indians found themselves adrift in an unwelcoming Britain – one admiral even ended up cleaning lavatories at Waterloo Station – while the stone elephants from forsaken estates reappeared in gardens in Tunbridge Wells.

The separation of Burma from India in 1937 as a distinct British colony (it became fully independent a decade later) proved pivotal, because it compelled Indian nationalists to define what they meant by India – or rather *Bharat*. In Mahatma Gandhi's quasi-religious vision, that definition did not include Burmese Buddhists. A far more extreme interpretation came from the Nazi-inspired Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu nationalist paramilitary organization that continues to thrive in India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Militant nationalism in both Burma and India in the 1930s and 1940s also drew strength from deeply racist Imperial Japan, which encouraged its local collaborators to rise against the British. One of the stranger episodes of this period was the only known civilian submarine-to-submarine transfer: in 1943, the nationalist leader

Subhas Chandra Bose was ferried by rubber dinghy from the German U-180 to the Japanese I-29, changing patrons as he set out to form the Japan-backed Indian National Army.

The exodus of roughly one million Indians from Burma indirectly strengthened Muslim League leader Muhammad Ali Jinnah's case for a Muslim-majority Pakistan, though the two parts of this poor, unwieldy state would be separated by about 1,000 miles of Indian territory. Our contemporary mental map of South Asia, bracketed by the Arabian Sea and Southeast Asia, is a direct result of these epic transformations.

Dalrymple's ambitious book compels readers to revisit a legacy that has long been obscured by British post-colonial nostalgia. How much more, after all, can one read about the love affair between Edwina Mountbatten and Jawaharlal Nehru? His work will be especially valuable to anyone even vaguely curious about the diversity of modern Britain, as well as to readers across South Asia, where mythologized tales of the ancient grandeur of their "civilizational states" continue to shape public life.

But beyond its regional scope, *Shattered Lands* offers a sobering reminder of the enduring perils of partition – a lesson that feels especially urgent today. Ukrainians have every reason to distrust Russia, which seeks to exploit Trump's fickleness, and his delegation of diplomacy to various amateur actors, to achieve what it cannot on the battlefield. And with the US no longer a dependable security guarantor, Europe once again finds itself on history's fault line, confronting a voracious predator whose imperial ambitions are summoning the same destructive forces of partition that once tore apart South Asia – and Europe itself.