

Sikh Formations

Religion, Culture, Theory

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rsfo20

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To cite this article: Gurharpal Singh (22 Feb 2024): Partition violence, Mountbatten and the Sikhs: A reassessment, Sikh Formations, DOI: [10.1080/17448727.2024.2318874](https://doi.org/10.1080/17448727.2024.2318874)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17448727.2024.2318874>



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Published online: 22 Feb 2024.



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Partition violence, Mountbatten and the Sikhs: A reassessment

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ABSTRACT

Despite major advances in the historiography of the partition, the causes of violence remain poorly understood. Drawing on new archival material, this article argues that violence in the Punjab resulted from the failure of the British Sikh policy from 1939. Mountbatten's complicity in the massacres, and his defence against the allegations, point to a wider policy failure. Systematic blame displacement for the violence onto the Sikhs by the Government of Pakistan, India, Britain, enabled the latter and Mountbatten to avoid responsibility for the consequences of the transfer of power to two highly centralised dominions for religious minorities.

KEYWORDS

Mountbatten; partition;
violence; Sikhs; India;
Pakistan; HMG

Almost 75 years after the event, the number of those who died because of the partition and its related violence continues to be revised upwards.¹ Although the subject has become a specialist sub-field in urban, feminist, genocide, subaltern, and demographic studies,² significant gaps remain in our understanding of the decision-making by the key actors³ in the transfer of power and the extent to which these were shaped by broader policy considerations. Lord Louis Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of India, the most high-profile individual at the centre of partition decision-making, is regularly cast as the chief villain.⁴ This singular focus however has overlooked how Mountbatten responded to the charges against him and how they revealed the fatal assumptions in official policies about some religious minorities in the years before 1947. This article examines how Mountbatten and His Majesty's Government (HMG, the Labour government in London)⁵ answered the allegations from the Government of Pakistan in 1948 that the Viceroy, his administration, and the Governor of the Punjab were complicit in one of the greatest calamities in history for the failure to arrest Sikh leaders who were alleged have committed most of the violence before and after August 15, 1947. It draws on files of the Foreign and Commonwealth Relations Office used in constructing the official response.⁶ Additionally, it utilises a previously unused *aide memoire* prepared by Mountbatten on the Sikhs at the height of the controversy.⁷ These materials are assessed against the background of British Sikh policy from 1939 and its consequences for geographically dispersed religious minority such as the Sikhs.

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Allegations again Mountbatten and the partition violence

Even before Mountbatten departed in June 1948 as the Governor-General of India, questions about his handling of the transfer of power were raised in the last days of the raj. To the accusations of a 'hasty scuttle', inadequate arrangements for the transfer of populations and a botched boundary-making process, was a more serious charge: namely, that Mountbatten and his staff in Delhi and the Punjab administration, who were fully aware of a well-organised Sikh conspiracy to attack Muslims, failed in their duty to arrest the Sikh leadership before the independence of India and Pakistan.⁸ These allegations first emerged in diplomatic communications in early September when the prime minister of Pakistan wrote to the British High Commissioner in Karachi about Sikh violence which he claimed had been left unchecked and now threatened to derail Pakistan by concentrating Sikhs in East Punjab.⁹ They became much more specific in the following months. In January 1948, British diplomats at the UN became aware that the Pakistan delegation planned to mention Mountbatten on a charge of genocide in an item on its general complaint on Kashmir before the Security Council meeting at Lake Success, New York. At the meetings on January 16th and 24th, the Pakistan delegate, Sir Muhammad Zafarullah Khan, presented a document that argued that Mountbatten, despite official decisions to act, failed to crush the Sikh conspiracy.¹⁰ He also added references to the unfairness of the territorial division of the Punjab that 'resulted from the unfortunate change in the Radcliffe award at Pakistan's expense'.¹¹ These charges were further publicly aired at a dinner party in Karachi at the end of February at which Begum Liaquat Ali Khan, the wife of the prime minister of Pakistan, claimed that a dossier implicating Mountbatten and the former Governor of Punjab, Sir Evan Jenkins, had been sent to HMG in London.¹² News of this dossier alarmed Mountbatten because according to his sources, Khan had informed an Indian delegate that he intended to involve Mountbatten 'personally in a genocide case at the UNO'.¹³ Although it appears the dossier was never forwarded to HMG, further allegations against Mountbatten for being an obstacle in the creation of Pakistan, causing the Kashmir problem, and denying Pakistan the crucial district of Gurdaspur, were made in *Dawn* in late April.¹⁴

In the next two months, as the Indo-Pakistan tensions reached a boiling point over the Kashmir cease-fire and the fraught bi-lateral relations, the Government of Pakistan, in anticipation of the UN Commission on Kashmir's visit to India, prepared a coordinated attack on Mountbatten's record. The first stage in this response was the rejection on July 3rd of an invitation by the High Commissioner for Pakistan in London to a dinner hosted by Clement Attlee in Downing Street to honour the returning Mountbatten. The High Commissioner could not conceal his anger. 'Mountbatten', he declared, 'had done immense damage to Pakistan'.¹⁵ Two days later, Gulam Mohammad, Pakistan's Finance Minister, on a visit to London, in a press conference stated that 'the blame for not preventing the events of [the] partition rests upon the shoulders of Lord Mountbatten'.¹⁶ The root of this responsibility, according to Mohammad, was Mountbatten's pro-Indian policies that were evident in his failed attempt to become the Governor-General of Pakistan as well as India, the failure to arrest the Sikh leaders, and the Kashmir problem for which he was responsible.¹⁷ This attack was also followed up the next day by a senior Pakistan politician, Sir Feroze Khan Noon, who was also visiting London. He launched a scathing indictment of HMG's response to Mohammad's statement for trying to shift

responsibility to Mountbatten's subordinates. In the following days, these accusations became more vitriolic, combined with further charges that Mountbatten had amended the Boundary Commission Award to deprive Pakistan of two *tehsils* in the district of Ferozepur. An editorial in *Dawn*, the official organ of the Muslim League with intimate ties to the government of Pakistan, marked the final climax of the Pakistan response: 'Lord Louis Mountbatten's criminal neglect to suppress the Sikh conspiracy when there was yet time and he had yet the power to do so', it thundered, 'was responsible for one of the most tragic upheavals of modern times'.¹⁸ This official mood was aptly captured in centre page cartoon illustration that portrayed Mountbatten as a self-obsessed image maker against the background of a burly Sikh killing a hapless female while a Pakistan statesman pointed an accusatory finger at Mountbatten with a banner headline 'He is to be blamed'.¹⁹

To be sure, Pakistan's allegations served a useful purpose: to deflect palpable anger against the nascent administration from refugees and their families in East Punjab and India whose interests had been cast adrift in the pursuit of independent statehood. They also appear to have been part of a systematic effort to reset the relationship with Britain which Mountbatten was seen to have consciously undermined to Pakistan's disadvantage. Subsequently, the ambiguities of nation-statehood became sacralised in the nationalist mythology of victimhood, a highly partisan and communal understanding of partition violence reflected in 1948 in officially-sponsored accounts.²⁰

Mountbatten's and HMG's response

Mountbatten's initial response, when he became aware of the full extent of the allegations, was to draw on unofficial channels to press upon Khan not to raise the charges at the UN.²¹ Khan was warned by the head of the UK delegate that such an action would be 'unwise', seriously contested and 'damage the reputation of the King's representative in India'.²² In early March, as Mountbatten prepared an extensive rebuttal, in a letter to Jenkins, the former governor of the Punjab, he claimed that 'my honour' as Viceroy is involved, and 'hence the honour of the British government generally'.²³ The UK delegate at the UN reported that Khan's statements had failed to attract much attention and it was therefore best to avoid giving them further prominence.²⁴ Patrick Gordon-Walker, Under-Secretary of State at the Commonwealth and Relations Office, noted after meeting Khan that he had agreed not to make any further references to Mountbatten and the Sikhs.²⁵ Despite this reassurance, Pakistan officials would soon break this promise.

Mountbatten also organised support from the Government of India. On July 11, Nehru wrote to Krishna Menon, India's High Commissioner in London, insisting that Pakistan's allegations were based on a false premise that 'the Sikhs were originators of and [the] guilty party in all that happened in mid-last year'.²⁶ In fact, according to Nehru, almost a half-million people had been displaced to East Punjab and other parts of India because of the Muslim League violence between the Rawalpindi massacre in March and early August. Nehru dismissed as 'childish nonsense' Mohammad and others' contention that the arrest of Master Tara Singh or a few others 'could have made any difference to the vast explosive situation which burst over the two provinces

of [the] Punjab very soon afterwards'.²⁷ This response, the British High Commissioner in Delhi noted, was welcome but the Indian press in its coverage of the issue was more interested in attacking Jinnah and the Muslim League than vindicating Mountbatten's actions.²⁸ If Mountbatten was counting on wider sympathy for his position within Indian public opinion, he was sorely disappointed.

From late January 1948, the Commonwealth Relations Office made a coordinated effort to manage these allegations by defending Mountbatten's actions, contesting Pakistan's claims, and maintaining a united front against queries from the press. Internal criticism from the Opposition was also anticipated by the preparation of a 'friendly' House of Commons question on the subject. In constructing this defence, however, the official had to balance two competing objectives: Mountbatten's determination to be vindicated and concerns about the soundness of his defence, including doubts among his former colleagues in India.

On March 2, 1948, Mountbatten wrote that the decision *not* to arrest the Sikh leaders in early August 1947 was taken not by him but by Jenkins. The latter, as the Governor of the Punjab, had acted on the matter in consultation with Governor-designates of East and West Punjab, Sir Chandulal Trivedi and Sir Francis Mudie, and 'against his own advice'.²⁹ This decision, he maintained, had its origins in the fall of the Unionist coalition government in the Punjab in early March after the Muslim League's agitation to establish its administration. Mountbatten further claimed he had warned Jinnah of the dangers of forming such a majoritarian government as it would invite violent reaction from the Sikhs. Referring specifically to the meeting in Delhi on August 5th, 1947,³⁰ at which the head of the Punjab CID presented the evidence implicating Master Tara Singh and the Maharaja of Faridkot in a conspiracy to expel Muslims of East Punjab, a plot to assassinate Mohammad Ali Jinnah on his inauguration as Governor-general of Pakistan on August 14th, and an attack on the Pakistan special train, Mountbatten observed that the decision to arrest the Sikh leaders was delegated to the Governor of the Punjab.³¹ Moreover, in an appendix to the note, he observed because he was the chairman of the Joint Defence Council, which oversaw the operations of the Punjab Boundary Force and served in this capacity as a servant of India and Pakistan, it would be most 'irregular for either government to attack its servant'. As an independent chairman, decisions of the Joint Defence Council were agreed upon by representatives of *both* India and Pakistan.³² Mountbatten's defence against the allegations, he insisted, was 'cast iron'.³³

However, officials dealing with Mountbatten's defence were not so convinced. They concluded that despite Mountbatten's efforts to shift responsibility onto the governor of the Punjab notwithstanding, the latter was constitutionally subject to the directions of the Governor-General (the Viceroy) under the Government of India Act (1935). They also cautioned against any lengthy reply to Mountbatten's tendentious communications to 'avoid unnecessary arguments'. When Jenkins was approached for his recollection of the events, he responded that the decision was a compromise outcome between Jinnah's insistence that the Sikh leaders should be arrested and Patel's opposition to such a measure. While Jenkins corrected the record as presented by Mountbatten, he also offered him a potential escape route. The failure to control violence in the Punjab before August 15th, Jenkins observed, was a general failure. It occurred because:

- (a) All the communities [Hindu, Muslim, Sikh] had plans for violent action;
- (b) That their plans were less elaborate than is commonly supposed, and depended largely on uncoordinated efforts;
- (c) That because of (a) and (b) effective action to defeat any 'plan' could be taken only by the simultaneous suppression of all three communities by forces numerically strong and entirely reliable;
- (d) And that action as in (c) would have implied the *detention of nearly all the members of [the Viceroy's] Executive Council*.³⁴

In taking this position, Jenkins was merely restating his earlier argument that he had made on the eve of independence. In governing the province under Section 93 from March onwards, he had been besieged by the political leadership of the Congress, the Muslim League and the Akalis to impose martial law in the Punjab to control the rising tide of communal violence which had paralysed the main cities. Nehru, Jinnah, Patel, and Baldev Singh had accused Jenkins of deliberate neglect in enforcing law and order. At the time Jenkins had responded by outlining the practical difficulties of imposing martial law in conditions where 'the two nations' were fighting 'one and another in the streets, in the markets, and in the fields and villages'.³⁵ In this 'communal war of succession', orchestrated by the Congress, the Muslim League, and the Akalis, according to Jenkins, the administration was hopelessly overwhelmed. As Jenkins tersely put it, the critics of his administration 'were participants in the events they professed to deplore'.³⁶

Jenkins' suggestion was welcomed by Mountbatten as 'excellent'.³⁷ The Secretary of State, on the other hand, was minded that in presenting the official response it 'was not wise to issue any detailed statement'. However, this line of resistance was soon undermined by the intense press pressure on the Commonwealth Relations Office to respond to Gulam Mohammad's statement in early July. The press note that was issued acknowledged that the decision not to detain the Sikh leaders was taken by the governor of the Punjab 'who was constitutionally responsible, subject to the Governor-General, for security in the Punjab'. It went further to explain that the decision was taken 'with the agreement of officials who were to become Governors of East and West Punjab'. The note concluded by forcefully asserting that 'HMG are satisfied that in its policy regarding the treatment of Sikh Leaders, Lord Mountbatten acted with full constitutional propriety, and his actions had the full approval of HMG'.³⁸

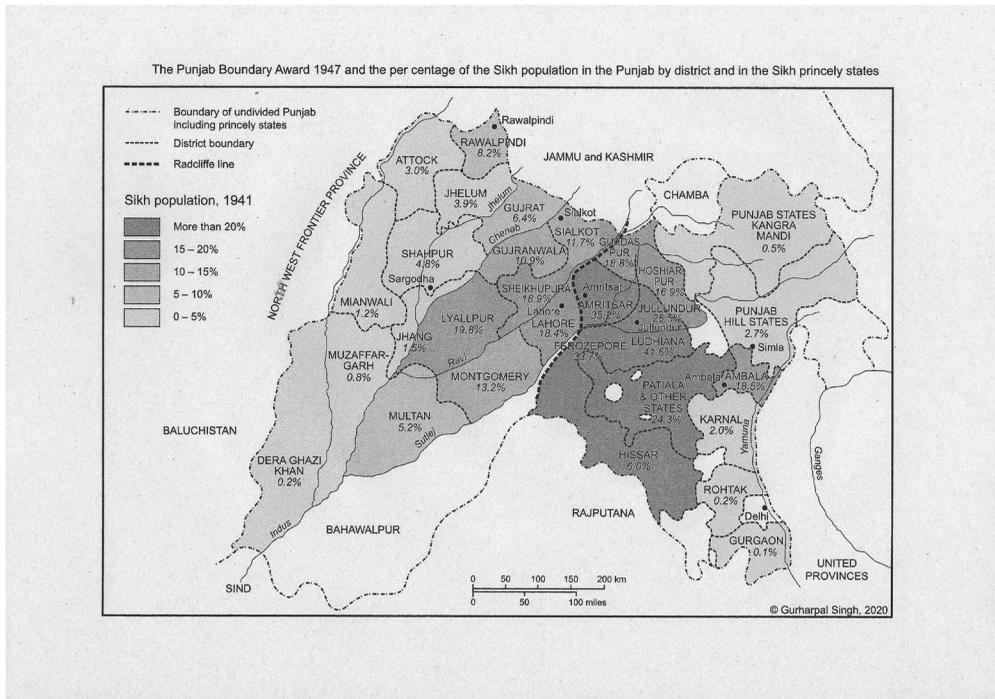
Not unnaturally the efforts to shift blame away from Mountbatten did not satisfy the Government of Pakistan. In another round of bitter recriminations, the Pakistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Commonwealth Relations questioned to what extent the 'full approval' of the UK government exonerated Mountbatten from the most serious charges. The most 'serious blame was now also attached to the British government', it added. 'The main responsibility for the policy that led to the horror of that dastardly tragic period', the statement once more asserted, 'must rest with Lord Mountbatten'.³⁹

HMG, Mountbatten and the Sikh policy, 1939–47

Mountbatten's actions and those of politicians and officials in Whitehall need to be placed within the framework of British Sikh policy after the outbreak of the Second

World War. By 1939, the Anglo-Sikh settlement which had been so crucial to the raj in the Punjab had come to 'the parting of the ways'.⁴⁰ The Akali Movement (1920-25), political radicalism among the Sikh peasantry in the 1930s and growing dissension among the Sikh soldiery had all seriously eroded the traditional pro-British loyalty of the community.⁴¹ Reacting to the Muslim League's Lahore Resolution for a call for Pakistan, the Akali leader Master Tara Singh, had described it as an 'open declaration of war'. Ominously, he predicted that Muslims would 'have to cross an ocean of Sikh blood to realise it'.⁴² Thus, in the 1940s the Sikh leadership consistently opposed any scheme of Pakistan that did not give the Sikhs an equal measure of self-determination for their interests – whether as an independent Sikh state or as a new Punjab province with boundaries redrawn and a reduced Muslim population of about 40 per cent.⁴³ British policy, in contrast, emphasised the unity of the Punjab that was recognised as a Muslim-majority province. The British impressed upon religious minorities, especially Hindus and Sikhs, to find a political accommodation within this framework in the interest of national Congress-Muslim League unity or practical community interests. Sir Stafford Cripps during his mission to India in 1942 for a post-war constitutional settlement, advised the Sikh leaders that their best interest lay in a united Punjab within which they could negotiate a Soviet-styled semi-autonomous region or throw in their lot with the Congress.⁴⁴ Similarly, the Cabinet Mission Plan (1946) placed the whole of the Punjab in Section B provinces – the Muslim majority provinces that could potentially group themselves into a Pakistan federation.⁴⁵ When, however, the Congress rejected the Cabinet Mission Plan, it signalled a shift in HMG's India policy, a pro-Congress tilt symbolised by Cripps' stewardship of the Labour government's India policy and Lord Wavell's replacement by Mountbatten.⁴⁶ Attlee's statement on February 20, 1947 in the House of Commons that Britain would leave India no later than June 1948 was the final admission that this policy had reached a dead end.

Mountbatten's approach to his negotiations with the Sikhs leaders following his arrival in New Delhi in March 1947 maintained the traditional policy which viewed the Sikhs as a minor party in the settlement between the Congress and the Muslim League.⁴⁷ Like Cripps and the Cabinet Mission before him, he asked the Sikh leaders to demonstrate the demographic feasibility of a Sikh state when the community did not command a majority in any district in the Punjab (see map). He and his team also rejected any efforts to redraw the boundaries of the Punjab. The demand for weightage on economic grounds because the Sikhs owned much of the agricultural wealth of the Punjab, especially in the Canal Colonies, was firmly dismissed.⁴⁸ Threats of direct action by the Sikh leaders and the Sikh princes, on the other hand, were met with counter-threats to use 'every weapon at [Mountbatten's] disposal ... to restore law and order'.⁴⁹ Mountbatten also attempted to act as the 'honest broker' in negotiations between Jinnah and the Sikh leaders, but these parleys quickly ended in mutual distrust when Jinnah declared that the 'Sikh leaders could go to the devil in their own way'.⁵⁰



The Boundary Commission was the device by which the Secretary-of-State for India hoped to ‘keep the Sikhs quiet until the transfer of power’.⁵¹ Its terms of reference to delimit the boundary on the principle of majority Muslim and non-Muslim majority contiguous districts were extended to include ‘other factors’ to reflect the cultural and religious heritage of communities. This addition was made at the insistence of Attlee to pacify the Sikhs,⁵² but the concession was quickly contested by Muslim League representatives in London who mobilised pro-Pakistan MPs with a parliamentary question to ensure the new terms also applied to non-Sikhs.⁵³ At the height of the discussions in London on the new draft for a settlement between the Congress and the Muslim League in May, Cripps had cautioned Attlee of the need to ‘divide out the Sikhs somehow or we will never get through’.⁵⁴ Yet, at the same time, the Cabinet India Committee was prepared to use the Sikhs *against* Jinnah to water down his resistance to a partition of the Punjab. ‘The proposals in their present form’, the Committee noted

were very unfavourable to the Sikhs and that, if the Muslim League refused to accept the scheme, it would be necessary for partition of the Punjab on the basis which would be substantially less favourable to the Muslims.⁵⁵

In the event, the 3rd June Plan which granted the two dominions of India and Pakistan made no mention of the Sikhs. At the press conference to announce the plan, Mountbatten claimed he was ‘most distressed about the position of the Sikhs’.⁵⁶ No single issue he professed was ‘discussed at such great length in London as this’.

Different formulae had been tried, but it was apparent that there would ... be difficulties if attempts were made to work on ... any principle other than the division between the majority Muslim and non-Muslim areas.⁵⁷

Nonetheless, the plan was agreed upon because following the Rawalpindi massacres the Sikh leadership had demanded the partition of Punjab. The Boundary Commission on which Sikh interests were represented, would 'work out the best long-term solution'.⁵⁸

In June and July, the deliberations of the Boundary Commission were accompanied by belligerent statements by the Sikh leaders. Master Tara Singh spoke of the 'extinction' or 'perpetual enslavement' of the Sikh community if it did not receive justice. Gainsi Kartar Singh, in an interview with Jenkins on July 10th, outlined the basis of the Sikh territorial claims. As Jenkins noted:

He said that they [the Sikhs] must have at least one canal system; they must have Nankana Sahib; finally, the arrangements must be such as to bring three-quarters or at least two-thirds of the Sikh population into Eastern Punjab. An exchange of populations on a large scale was essential ... Property as well as population should be taken into account in the exchange [as] the Sikhs are on the whole better off than Muslims. The Giani asserted that unless it was recognised by HMG., the Viceroy and party leaders that the fate of the Sikhs was a vital issue in the proceedings of the transfer of power, there would be trouble.⁵⁹

Following the meeting, Jenkins noted that 'This was the nearest thing to an ultimatum yet given on behalf of the Sikhs'.⁶⁰ A day later, the Sikh leaders were adamant that there was only one possible way out:

The only solution was a very substantial exchange of population. If this did not occur, the Sikhs would be driven to facilitate it by a massacre of Muslims in Eastern Punjab. The Muslims had already got rid of Sikhs in the Rawalpindi Division and much land and property there could be made available to Muslims from East Punjab. Conversely, Sikhs could get rid of Muslims in the East in the same way and invite Sikhs from the West to take their place.⁶¹

These statements confirmed Jenkins' worst fears. From early 1946 he had cautioned his superiors of the need to understand the demands of the Sikh leadership because 'the Punjab Sikhs could wreck any scheme of which they disapproved'.⁶² Jenkins believed, correctly, that the loss of the Canal Colonies in West Punjab would inevitably trigger retribution against Muslims in East Punjab. When the Boundary Award was announced, excluding most of the areas claimed by the Sikhs in West Punjab, the Sikh leaders true to their word, decided to 'turn the Muslims out'.⁶³

Mountbatten's *aide-memoire* on the Sikhs

Violence was central to the creation of independent India and Pakistan, but the focus on *who did it* enabled HMG, the Government of India, and the Government of Pakistan to place themselves at arm's length from its causation, to make the Sikhs 'the scapegoats of partition [violence]'.⁶⁴ Explanations for Sikh actions vary from structural to psychological: as a retributive genocide,⁶⁵ as a result of high levels of community militarisation,⁶⁶ as an ideological product of colonially engineered Khalsa ideology,⁶⁷ and as an outcome of a hypermasculine peasant society.⁶⁸ These community-centred explanations have added immeasurably to our understanding of the complex nature of partition violence, but by themselves they do not adequately account for the institutional processes that produced the turmoil. Mountbatten's amnesia about these conditions, and indeed his actions, was central to how he constructed the Sikh question in his *aide memoire*.

On February 24, 1948, Mountbatten composed an *aide memoire* ‘The Sikhs’ following his telegram to Attlee about the allegations.⁶⁹ The note was prepared after Khan’s speech for use by the Indian delegation at the Security Council. Its main argument was that the Boundary Award had enabled the Sikh leaders to add a ‘war of revenge’ (to exact revenge for the lost territories in West Punjab) to a ‘war of survival’ (the dislocation brought by the transfer of power).⁷⁰ Citing no evidence, Mountbatten insisted that before the Rawalpindi riots, the Sikh leadership was prepared to join the scheme for Pakistan to maintain a measure of autonomy. This option was considered seriously because it would ensure the unity of the Punjab and allay fears of ‘economic absorption by the Hindus’.⁷¹ The Sikh leadership, in Mountbatten’s view, feared ‘the virtual extinction of Sikhs as a political force and [their] survival only as a rapidly dwindling religious sect of Hinduism’.⁷²

However, because the Sikh leaders played their hand very badly before August 15, many people in ‘high positions [presumably Mountbatten, HMG, Nehru, Patel, Jinnah] ... thought they were exhausted as a major political factor and could be ignored’.⁷³ The relocation of Sikh refugees from West Punjab ‘was well directed and well carried out’ with ‘military precision’. As a result, the Sikhs were now concentrated in their ‘original homeland in East Punjab, and their weight was felt as far as Shimla and Delhi’. The central government in Delhi, Mountbatten cautioned, was faced with a dilemma: to impose its writ upon the community at the cost of alienating the Sikhs in the army or to concede a measure of autonomy ‘within the Indian Union on a condition that they extend no further east, and settle down to the peaceful administration of their territory’.⁷⁴ For Mountbatten, this was the ‘lesser of the two evils’ as Delhi was in danger of becoming the border of a new Sikh state. The newly found Sikh resurgence, Mountbatten opined, was not only a threat to independent India but also Pakistan because the Sikhs controlled the headworks which irrigated the Canal Colonies that were ‘not beyond their striking distance’. ‘The possibility of such an action’, Mountbatten continued, ‘was real’ and the ‘effect on the Pakistan economy would be great’.⁷⁵ ‘The Sikhs’, Mountbatten warned,

are a threat not only to Hindustan but also to Pakistan, and they are in a mood to take action. They are in a mood to take precipitate action, and this might possibly be their undoing.⁷⁶

Remarkably, the *aide memoire* refers only indirectly to the Pakistan allegations. What it does reveal most explicitly are the unintended consequences of the June 3rd Plan and the Boundary Commission Award: the costs of overlooking Sikh demands as unnegotiable. A reaction against the Boundary Award was expected.⁷⁷ That is why Mountbatten and HMG had delayed the public announcement of the award until August 17th. What was not taken into serious calculations, notwithstanding the warnings of Jenkins, was how quickly the Sikh community would shift from a ‘war of survival’ to a ‘war of revenge’.

The *aide memoire* provided little substance for Mountbatten’s defence. Its importance lay in justifying Mountbatten’s and HMG’s decision-making in the crucial months before August 15th by insulating the British, and by default, the governments of India and Pakistan, for the mayhem that ensued. At the same time, the memorandum reconstructed the familiar tropes of Sikh political leadership, its refusal to play the role for which it was cast

by rejecting the logic of majoritarian communal politics which made any practical resolution of the Sikh question impossible. No doubt the document also served the function of bolstering the Indian delegation's position at the UN in preparing its defence against Pakistan over Kashmir and internal disorder in the Punjab and Delhi. But Mountbatten, as independent India's Governor-General, was on borrowed time. He was, above all, determined to be vindicated and safeguard his legacy.

A reassessment

Allegations by the Government of Pakistan against Mountbatten that he bore the main responsibility for partition violence in the Punjab because he failed to detain the Sikh leaders before the Boundary Commissions Award were only the opening skirmishes in the reassessment of Mountbatten's viceroyalty. In themselves, as Jenkins observed, the charges were meritless because they highlighted a particular political decision – to the neglect of the whole process of the transfer of power and the actions of the Muslim League. In so doing, they concealed more than they revealed. Nehru was probably closer to the mark when he dismissed them as 'childish nonsense'. The allegations were clearly a political response to the immense pressures of refugees from India and the increasing post-partition tensions between India and HMG with Pakistan which climaxed in the Kashmir conflict. By also adding accusations of changes in the Boundary Commission Award at the last minute to Sikh-instigated violence, *prima facie* the charge of an organised conspiracy appeared much more credible than would otherwise have been.

Whatever the substance of the allegations, at the time and subsequently, they drew attention to the unresolved outcomes of the Sikh question which had bedevilled British policy-making in the Punjab. However, given the openness with which the Sikh leadership after 1940 had indicated its intention to redraw on the ground any settlement considered unfavourable to the community, the question then arises why, in Mountbatten's own words, the decision-makers in Delhi and London calculated that Sikh threats 'could be ignored?'

There are two possible answers to this puzzle, both are mutually compatible. The first lies in the continuity of British Sikh policy after 1939. The Churchill-led coalition's pro-Muslim League bias was corrected by the Labour government's pro-Congress sympathies which saw in Nehru the kindred spirit of social democracy. This change however was not followed by any serious reflections on the modularity of Congress' social democracy and Hindu majoritarianism, the implications this had for India's religious minorities, or any extended reflections on how this approach institutionalised communal majoritarianism.⁷⁸ Paradoxically, it also ran counter to the colonial experience in India of nurturing plural power-sharing that worked reasonably well in religiously and ethnically divided provinces. Similarly, the rich experience of continental democracies and how they framed the problem of minorities in public policy during the inter-war period, was also consciously ignored. Not unnaturally therefore minorities in India during these critical years mostly rejected the majoritarian Westminster model that had proved so disastrous after the Government of India Act (1935) and had contributed in large measure to the polarisation of politics between the Congress and the Muslim League. As a

result, a geographically dispersed but significant minority like the Sikhs, sustained a rear-guard battle against the discourse of dominant communal majoritarianism, whether of the Muslim League or the 'secular' predominantly Hindu Congress, arguing instead for lasting protection for minority rights and the creation of religious and ethnically plural governance that resembled contemporary consociationalism democracies.⁷⁹ Arguably, the deliberate erasure of these post-colonial alternatives contributed in no small measure to the creation of two highly centralised states that have followed institutionalised path-dependence that has climaxed in ethnic democracies in India and Pakistan.⁸⁰

Second, the reason why the Sikh threat was not taken seriously though its seriousness was fully recognised was not unrelated to the complexities of the Sikh question which defied clinical vivisection between India and Pakistan. British rationality suggested that the problem was best left for the governments of India and Pakistan to resolve in their own ways. There is sufficient evidence in Jenkins' communications to support this contention. If the Sikh leadership was preparing to take direct action after the British departure, the British were only too eager to hasten the process. In March 1947, the Punjab was placed under Section 93 to forestall an exclusive Muslim League government in the run-up to independence for fear of an outright Sikh rebellion. As we have seen above, the Sikh leadership was clear in communicating its intentions to Jenkins, who viewed them as an 'ultimatum'. The consequence of these unspoken assumptions was that East Punjab became a 'gift of the Akalis [Sikh leaders] to the Indian Union'.⁸¹

In the end, though the charges levelled by the Government of Pakistan were politically motivated they did contain a grain of truth. Mountbatten and Jenkins were realistic to delay the arrest of the Sikh leaders before August 15th because the political situation on the ground made this impractical. Whether their arrests would have made any material difference seems highly implausible. However, measured by the contemporary standards of international law, it is doubtful whether Mountbatten, HMG, the leadership of Congress, the Muslim League, and the Sikhs would have avoided charges of, if not prosecution for, aiding and abetting genocide. Ironically, Khan, who was Pakistan's most distinguished diplomat in the 1950s, and contemplated implicating Mountbatten on a charge of genocide at the UN, joined the International Court of Justice and became its president in 1970.

Finally, Mountbatten's response to the allegations against him and the reaction of HMG suggests that the methodological divide between the different schools of partition historiography is not as wide as is sometimes suggested. A more critical focus on how elite actors made their decisions and, indeed, non-decisions, can help us to reveal the 'actors' assumptive worlds' or 'mental models' that 'provide both an interpretation of the environment and a prescription as to how that environment should be structured'.⁸² As we have seen, underlying policy decisions and non-decisions were fundamental assumptions about power and communities – those that counted and others which could be ignored. These assumptions were not only shaped by colonial rule but shared in large measure by the Indian and Pakistani post-colonial governing elites. Critically understanding the unspoken assumptions that shaped and structured the transfer of power might well hold the key to the nature of the tragedy that then unfolded.

Notes

1. The latest estimates are 18 million people displaced and 3.7 million who went 'missing'. See Prashant Bharadwaj, Asim Khwaja and Atif Mian, 'The Big March: Migratory Flows after the Partition of India', *Economic and Political Weekly* (August 30, 2008): 39–49.
2. For a review of the literature, see Ian Talbot and Gurharpal Singh, *The Partition of India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), Ch.1.
3. The term key actors as used in the paper refers mostly to elite British administrators in London and India and Indian politicians. Inevitably, most of whom were men.
4. See Leonard Mosely, *The Last Days of the British Raj* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1961); Philip Ziegler, *Mountbatten: the official biography* (London: Guild Publishing, 1985), 438–441.
5. HMG is the collective term for British government in the UK.
6. India Office Record (henceforth IOR) L/PJ/10/119.
7. Hartley Library, University of Southampton (henceforth UoS). 62/MB/1/D291. The Sikhs. Draft Aide-Memore by the Governor General of India, February 24, 1948.
8. MS62/MB/1/D74.
9. See IOR L/PJ/10/119. Telegram from UK High Commissioner New Delhi, September 12, 1948.
10. *Dawn* (Karachi), July 10, 1948.
11. IOR L/PJ/10/119. Telegram from the United Kingdom Delegation to United Nations, February 20, 1948. Allegations that Mountbatten had tampered with the Boundary Commission Award at the last minute to the disadvantage of Pakistan were a substantial part of the Pakistan case against him. HMG's response to these charges that are heavily documented in this file. Although considered together by the Government of Pakistan, they were unrelated to the charges against Sikh leaders. For reasons of brevity, we focus on the latter only. For a review of the debates around the Boundary Commission Award in the Punjab, see Lucy Chester, *On the Edge: Borders, Territory and Conflict in South Asia* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008).
12. *Ibid.* Personal note to PM Clement Attlee from Lord Louis Mountbatten, February 24, 1948.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Dawn*, April 27, 1948.
15. IOR L/PJ/10/119. Letter from High Commissioner for Pakistan to the Prime Minister, July 3, 1948.
16. *Ibid.* Text of a Globe Agency message sent to India and Pakistan, July 5, 1948.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Dawn*, July 7, 1948.
19. *Ibid.*
20. See Government of West Punjab, *The Sikhs in Action* (Lahore: West Punjab Government Printing 1948) and West Punjab Government, *Notes on the Sikh Plan* (Lahore: West Government Printing, 1948). For how these 'communal' versions, in both India and Pakistan, influenced nation-making, see Talbot and Singh, *Partition*, Ch.1.
21. IOR L/PJ/10/119. Telegram from the United Kingdom Delegation to United Nations, February 20, 1948.
22. *Ibid.*, Telegram, February 28, 1948.
23. *Ibid.* Mountbatten letter to Jenkins, March 13, 1948.
24. *Ibid.* Telegram to UK Delegation, New York. February 27, 1948.
25. *Ibid.*, Note by Sir Paul Patrick, March 2, 1948.
26. *Ibid.*, Telegram. Ministry of External Affairs and Commonwealth Relations, New Delhi, July 11, 1948.
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*, Dispatch no.112. Office of the High Commissioner of the UK in India, July 21, 1948.
29. *Ibid.*, Letter from Mountbatten to P.J. Noel-Barker, March 2, 1948.
30. *Ibid.* Those present at the meeting included Mountbatten, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, head of the Muslim League, Liaqat Ali Khan, Finance Minister, Sardar Vallabhahi Patel, Minister for Home

- Affairs and Captain Savage. Khan and Patel were both serving ministers in the Interim Government and members of the Viceroy's Executive Council. Savage was head of Punjab's CID
31. Ibid., (Mountbatten). Brief for the Indian Delegation to the Security Council. The refutation of the charges in connection with the Sikh allegations against the Governor-General of India, March 1, 1948
 32. Ibid.
 33. Ibid., Letter from Mountbatten to P.J. Noel-Barker, March 2, 1948.
 34. Ibid., Telegram to UK High Commissioner in India, April 7th, 1948. Emphasis added.
 35. Lionel Carter ed., *Punjab Politics: 1 June 1947–14 August 1947 Tragedy Governors' Fortnightly Reports and Other Key Documents* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2007), 201.
 36. Ibid., 195.
 37. IOR L/PJ/10/119. Letter from Mountbatten to Lord Ismay, April 11, 1948.
 38. Ibid., Telegram to UK High Commission in India and UK High Commission in Pakistan, July 5, 1948. Mudie was later to admit his reason for agreement with Jenkins and Trivedi. 'To leave them [the Sikh leaders] in West Punjab would have resulted in grave accusations against Great Britain, and the likelihood that something would happen to them was great. I think this was the last consideration that influenced Sir Francis Maudie most in making up his mind; I hope for his sake the Muslims do not find this out'. Ibid., Extract from noting by Sir W. Jenkin on OPDOM No.55 UKHC in Pakistan, July 14, 1948.
 39. *The Manchester Guardian*, July 9, 1948.
 40. IOR L/WS/3006. The disaffection of Sikh troops. Letter of the Governor of the Punjab to the Viceroy, August 1, 1940. Letter of the Governor of the Punjab, Sir Henry Duffield Craik to the Viceroy, August 1, 1940.
 41. See J.S. Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), Ch.8.
 42. *The Tribune* (Lahore), April 8, 1940.
 43. Gurharpal Singh and Giorgio Shani, *Sikh Nationalism: From a Dominant Minority to an Ethno-Religious Diaspora* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), Ch.4
 44. Ibid., 86–87.
 45. Ibid., 95–97.
 46. Ibid., 97–98.
 47. Of his first meeting with the Sikh leaders, Master Tara Singh and Giani Kartar Singh, Mountbatten wrote: 'These two, jungle-looking old men were immensely learned in their knowledge of every part of the Cabinet Mission's negotiations and subsequent debates in the House of Commons'. Nicholas Mansergh and Penderel Moon, eds., *The Transfer of Power*. Vol. 10. (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1981), 323.
 48. Singh and Shani, *Sikh Nationalism*, 98–9.
 49. UoS Ms 62/MB/1/D70. Lord Mountbatten's Interview with the Maharaja of Nabha, April 17, 1947.
 50. Penderel Moon, *Divide and Quit: An Eye Witness Account of the Partition of India* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961), 87.
 51. Mansergh and Moon, *Transfer of Power* (1981), 712.
 52. *Hansard*, July 14, 1947.
 53. Nicholas Mansergh and Penderel Moon, eds., *The Transfer of Power*. Vol. 12. (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1983), 323.
 54. Mansergh and Moon, *Transfer of Power* (1981), 386.
 55. Ibid., 330.
 56. Mansergh and Moon, *Transfer of Power* (1983), 41
 57. Ibid.
 58. Ibid.
 59. Ibid., 72–73.
 60. Ibid., 74.
 61. Ibid., 103.
 62. Nicholas Mansergh and Penderel Moon, eds., *The Transfer of Power*. Vol. 6 (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1976), 724–5.

63. Master Tara Singh, interviewed in 1967, quoted in Paul R. Brass, 'The Partition of India and Retributive Genocide in the Punjab', 1946–47: Means, Method, and Purpose', *Journal of Genocide Research* 5 no. 1 (2003): 71–101; 77.
64. Mosely, 235. See also, Ian Copland. 'The Master and the Maharajas: The Sikh Princes and the East Punjab Massacres of 1947', *Modern Asian Studies* 36, no.3 (2003):657–704.
65. Brass, 'Retributive Genocide'.
66. Sumitra Jha and Steve Wilkinson, 'Does Combat Experience Foster Organisational Skills; Evidence from ethnic Cleansing during the Partition of South Asia', *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 4 (2012): 883–907.
67. Clive Dewey, 'Honour and Martyr: The Ideological Origins of Sikh Violence', paper presented at a conference on 'Rethinking Partition Violence in Punjab', University of Southampton, April 10, 2010 (oral presentation).
68. Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silences: Voices from the Partition of India* (London: Hurst and Co. 2000).
69. UoS. Ms62/MB/1/D291. This document is uncannily similar in content and style to a summary note on 'The Sikh Problem', which is unsigned but included at the end of Record of Governor-General's Interview No.21 with Major General Pert, September 19, 1948. UoS. Ms 62/MB/1/D73/24. The note was written at the height of the disorder in the Punjab when Mountbatten had rushed back from vacation to Delhi to help re-establish law and order in the city. Given the document was a record of an interview and the interview record is signed by Major General Pert, it is most likely that Mountbatten was the author of the appended note.
70. *Ibid.*, 1.
71. *Ibid.*
72. *Ibid.*
73. *Ibid.* Emphasis added.
74. *Ibid.*, 2.
75. *Ibid.*, 3.
76. *Ibid.*
77. Mountbatten would later contend that 'Neither Jenkins nor Abell [Private Secretary to the Viceroy] foresaw the eruption on the scale and lines it took place. They foresaw trouble ... I listened to their warnings ... What went wrong was the sheer simultaneous mass reaction which nobody foresaw'. Quoted in Larry Collins and Dominic Lapierre, *Mountbatten and Independent India: 16 August 1947–18 June 1948* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1984), 21.
78. For an analysis of how the two perspectives merged during India's constitution-making, see Rochana Bajpai, *Debating Difference: Group Rights and Liberal Democracy in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), 77–85.
79. Singh and Shani, *Sikh Nationalism*, 88–95.
80. Path-dependency theory predicts that once a particular policy choice is made at a critical juncture, it becomes difficult if not impossible to reverse. It is closely aligned with the institutional approach to public policy. See Paul Pierson, 'Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics', *American Political Science Review* 94, no. 2 (2000): 251–267. For ethnic democracy, see Christophe Jaffrelot, *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).
81. Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*, 180.
82. Arthur T. Denzu and Douglas C. North, 'Shared Mental Models: Ideologies and Institutions', *Kyklos* 17 no.1 (1994): 4.

Acknowledgements

The support of the Leverhulme Trust is gratefully acknowledged. I should also like to thank Professor Ian Talbot and two anonymous reviewers for their feedback.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This article is an output from the Leverhulme Trust Research Fellowship number RF-2018-064/6 for 'A World Turned Upside Down: Sikhs and the Partition of India'.