Review - Partitions

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CARTER JOHNSON, FEB 15 2020

Partitions: A Transnational History of Twentieth-Century Territorial Separatism
By Dubnov, A. M. and Robson, L. (eds.)
Stanford University Press, 2019

If publishers were jailed for false advertising, Stanford University Press might receive a lifetime sentence for this masterful collection of essays. This is *not* a transnational history of twentieth century territorial separatism, as the title claims, but rather one of the most well-integrated and well-written edited volumes of the British Empire's partitioning of Palestine, Ireland, and India ever produced. The book's extremely narrow focus excludes the vast majority of what specialists would consider the twentieth century's partitions and secessions (e.g., Bangladesh, Chechnya, Kosovo, Somaliland, etc.), but the book is better for it, permitting the reader to receive a rich exploration of multiple perceptions of partition, how partition was manipulated transnationally to serve select interests, and the lessons these cases have for understanding majorities, minorities, territorial control, and security in many of today's conflicts.

The book fills several gaps, most notably drawing attention to the significant connections between Palestine, India, and Ireland. Much of value has been written about these cases in the past, but rarely have the interconnections between these partitions been investigated despite the "division of a territory [being] a striking characteristic of British decolonization" (p.155). The volume's overall goal is to understand why partition emerged as a proposed solution and how the cases are connected beyond their obvious ties to Britain.

Of the many strengths to be found in this volume, this review will highlight four that weave throughout the chapters and deserve mention in the short space available. Part One of the book, titled "Origins and Genealogies", draws attention to partition's use as a control mechanism rather than the better-known understanding of partition as a vehicle to achieve independence or a tool to "cut and run." Dubnov and Robson's excellent introduction notes that partition was "less a vehicle for national liberation than a novel, sophisticated dīvide et imperā tactic that sought to co-opt the new global tilt toward the ethnic nation-state" (p.2). In fact, partition, in Dubnov's words, was initially a tool of "intraimperial governance" (p.84). His chapter on Reginald Coupland and others in the influential Round Table group, demonstrates how they attempted to restructure the British Empire for a changing global landscape: they viewed partition as a mechanism to devolve powers and allow the Empire to emerge in some confederal structure. While partition was not part of a "master plan" and the term itself did not remain fixed, partition's appeal lay partly in its ability to allow British control to continue, "offering federation, cooperation, and even unity across the empire" (p.42) Focusing specifically on the Palestine Mandate, Motti Golani's chapter picks up on this evolving understanding of partition that occurred within the Zionist movement, including how this understanding was influenced by the violence in Palestine, the personal ambitions of Chaim Weizmann, and discussions with policy-makers in London in the run-up to the Balfour Declaration.

This lack of a master plan could not be clearer from another fascinating theme throughout the book: the vastly different degrees of planning that went into these three partitions. Ireland's partition, for example, was a consequence of "decades of negotiation between Ireland, its Protestant settlers, and the British imperial state" (p.6). Palestine, meanwhile, had nineteen commissions in the run-up to 1947 (p.163), commissions that contained contradictory positions and conclusions, including the Peel Commission's report, which supported partition with population transfers, and the Woodhead Commission's report, which rejected that plan as unworkable the following year.

Ironically, Britain did not ultimately support the UN partition plan for Palestine, while it simultaneously, if reluctantly, supported the partition of India despite its outrageous lack of preparation. India's rushed plan left the boundary commission fewer than two months to complete its work. Lucy Chester has a superb chapter investigating specifically how partition was viewed and discussed by various sides of the conflict in India and Palestine between 1936 and 1948. In fact, all three chapters in Part Two of the book (by Lucy Chester, Kate O'Malley, and Penny Sinanoglou) work well together, exploring how partition in one territory was used by various factions in other territories either to advance their own agendas (e.g., leader of the All-India Muslim League Muhammad Ali Jinnah drawing attention to Ireland's partition to legitimize the creation of Pakistan) or to avoid perceived prior pitfalls (e.g., the Peel Commission drawing on earlier imperial examples of partition, including the lesser-known division of Bengal in 1905-11). Vocal criticism within India of the Peel Commission's proposal is said to have helped derail it. As Sinanoglou notes, these partitions were "intensely local and fundamentally transnational … developed by officials who drew both on their own experience on the ground in multiple territories and on prior British imperial partitions" (p.156).

Part Three of the book ("Acceptance, Resistance, and Accommodation") is comprised of three chapters primarily about the rejection of partition. Joel Beinin's fascinating contribution looks at the importance some Middle East elites placed on establishing the Arab Offices in Jerusalem and Western capitals, recruiting "a group of Western-educated young intellectuals to articulate a liberal case against partition" (p.204). While these efforts were underfunded and subject to infighting among Arab leaders, they demonstrate the sophisticated battle of ideas taking place over the fate of Palestine, and provides a welcome counter-balance to a literature that more often highlights the lobbying efforts of pro-partition Zionists. Adi Gordon's chapter similarly emphasizes a lesser-known phenomenon by drawing attention to "Binational Zionists," focusing on Brit Shalom, "a tiny, radical opposition group" (p.179). Brit Shalom had a "principled rejection of the nation-state model," arguing that "[o]nly a complete parity of the nations … would keep Zionism clear of settler colonialism, and a binational state seemed to offer the most natural format for the implementation of such a Zionism" (p.181). Priya Satia's insightful chapter draws attention to the complicated histories of intellectuals and their relationship with partition, with some, such as Muhammed Iqbal, expressing the possibility of "transcending" the national in British India, but also being integral to Pakistan's birth as a nation.

Dirk Moses's epilogue steps back from the in-depth case study analyses of the book's prior chapters to provide a skilful framework, helping the reader understand how minorities are (ab)used by elites to construct understandings of security, even after partition. These security concerns are addressed through tools that include ethnic cleansing and "communal hostage taking" ("if you mistreat our minorities we'll mistreat yours" (p.272)), and Moses draws on parallels from inter-war Europe to demonstrate the devastating effects this can have on minority communities. Partition, for Moses, is futile given that it "does not so much solve minority issues as deposit them into different containers as minority issues reappear in partitioned units" (p.258).

While I stand by my compliment to the editors for their exclusive focus on partition in Britain's Empire, I nevertheless would have liked to have seen at least a chapter exploring the "non-partitions" within the British decolonization process. What was the impact of the partitions of Ireland, Palestine, and India on Britain's other territories that similarly experienced ethnosectarian violence but were not partitioned during decolonization (e.g., Cyprus)? Such cases could tell us a great deal about the influence of partition on alternative decision-making within the Empire. By including only territories that experienced partition, a significant part of the partition story is left out.

Finally, I want to close by looking at the book in relation to the disciplines of political science and International Relations. Dubnov and Robson's introduction does address the literature, referring to "Political scientists' wholesale acceptance of the premise of partition as a clear and simple, if morally fraught, preexisting tool of international diplomacy" (p.25). This "application-oriented, policy-guiding literature, both pro- and anti-partition, fails utterly to recognize the historical contingencies that served to produce the idea … Partition … is not an independent, free-standing 'solution' to anything; it is an idea that was invented in very particular circumstances" (p.24). I would challenge their assumption that political scientists have wholesale accepted the premise of partition as clear and simple (see, for example, Jenne 2012), although I agree with Dubnov and Robson that most political scientists and policy makers do not know the genesis of partition. Nevertheless, for those who accept partition as a tool, does it matter how it emerged or whether they know the genesis in order to answer the questions they are asking? Perhaps every tool in the policy-maker's arsenal falls into the same category as partition: consociationalism, federalism, and

peacekeeping, to name a few, have each evolved considerably from its origins, but surely that does not prevent scholars from testing whether the tools, as defined by the scholars, contribute to greater levels of peace or violence.

Having said that, even if we take partition advocates on their own terms, accepting they can test whether partition can facilitate peace, the case studies in this book contain a stark warning: even well-researched plans to implement partition can easily be overtaken by events on the ground at very short notice. These are practical challenges that appear unavoidable and deeply troubling. It suggests that, even if an international power agreed to set up humanitarian corridors for minorities to move to newly established "national homelands," those plans could be made obsolete before the first international soldiers hit the ground. One has the impression that these practical challenges are the rule, not the exception, raising grave concerns about partition's application as a proactive policy to be "implemented." Partition may yet have a role in creating peace, but as this book makes categorically clear, the burden of proof remains very much on the pro-partitionists.

About the author:

Carter Johnson is an Associate Professor at the National Research University HSE in Moscow, Russia. Carter holds a PhD in Government and Politics from the University of Maryland, College Park and an MSc from the London School of Economics. Carter's research has been published in *International Security*, *World Politics*, and *Civil Wars*, among others; he is currently completing a manuscript on partition as a solution to civil wars. Carter is also a Regional Director at American Councils, an organization working to increase academic mobility and educational competencies.