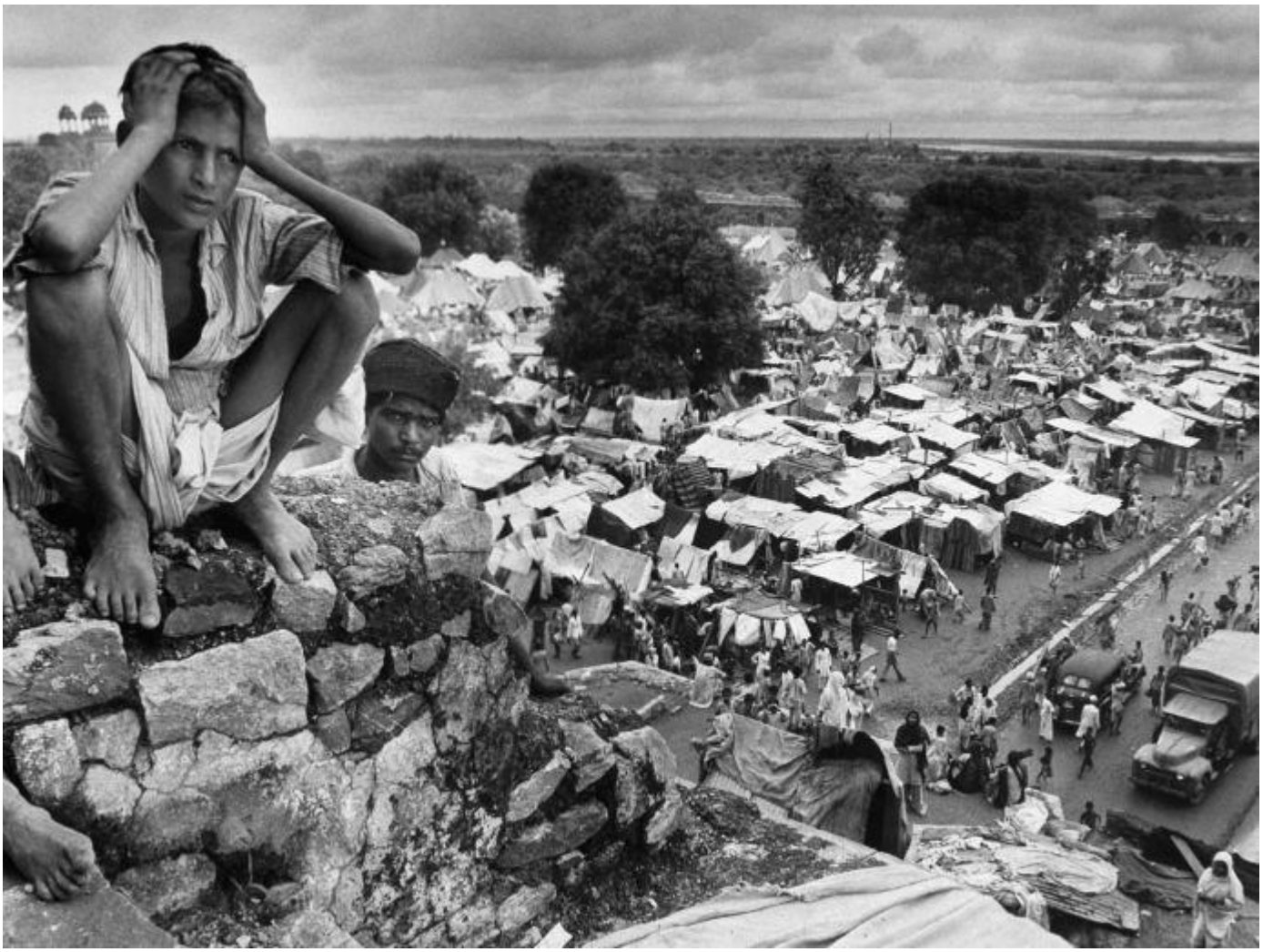
The Great Divide

The violent legacy of Indian Partition.



Partition displaced fifteen million people and killed more than a million.Photograph by Margaret Bourke-White / LIFE Picture Collection / Getty

In August, 1947, when, after three hundred years in India, the British finally left, the subcontinent was partitioned into two independent nation states: Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan. Immediately, there began one of the greatest migrations in human history, as millions of Muslims trekked to West and East Pakistan (the latter now known as Bangladesh) while millions of Hindus and Sikhs headed in the opposite direction. Many hundreds of thousands never made it.

Across the Indian subcontinent, communities that had coexisted for almost a millennium attacked each other in a terrifying outbreak of sectarian violence, with Hindus and Sikhs on one

side and Muslims on the other—a mutual genocide as unexpected as it was unprecedented. In Punjab and Bengal—provinces abutting India's borders with West and East Pakistan, respectively—the carnage was especially intense, with massacres, arson, forced conversions, mass abductions, and savage sexual violence. Some seventy-five thousand women were raped, and many of them were then disfigured or dismembered.

Nisid Hajari, in "Midnight's Furies" (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt), his fast-paced new narrative history of Partition and its aftermath, writes, "Gangs of killers set whole villages aflame, hacking to death men and children and the aged while carrying off young women to be raped. Some British soldiers and journalists who had witnessed the Nazi death camps claimed Partition's brutalities were worse: pregnant women had their breasts cut off and babies hacked out of their bellies; infants were found literally roasted on spits."

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 death camps is not so far-fetched as it may seem. Partition is central to modern identity in the Indian subcontinent, as the Holocaust is to identity among Jews, branded painfully onto the regional consciousness by memories of almost unimaginable violence. The acclaimed Pakistani historian Ayesha Jalal has called Partition "the central historical event in twentieth century South Asia." She writes, "A defining moment that is neither beginning nor end, partition continues to influence how the peoples and states of postcolonial South Asia envisage their past, present and future."

After the Second World War, Britain simply no longer had the resources with which to control its greatest imperial asset, and its exit from India was messy, hasty, and clumsily improvised. From the vantage point of the retreating colonizers, however, it was in one way fairly successful. Whereas British rule in India had long been marked by violent revolts and brutal suppressions, the British Army was able to march out of the country with barely a shot fired and only seven casualties. Equally unexpected was the ferocity of the ensuing bloodbath.

The question of how India's deeply intermixed and profoundly syncretic culture unravelled so quickly has spawned a vast literature. The polarization of Hindus and Muslims occurred during just a couple of decades of the twentieth century, but by the middle of the century it was so complete that many on both sides believed that it was impossible for adherents of the two religions to live together peacefully. Recently, a spate of new work has challenged seventy years of nationalist mythmaking. There has also been a widespread attempt to record oral memories of Partition before the dwindling generation that experienced it takes its memories to the grave.

The first Islamic conquests of India happened in the eleventh century, with the capture of Lahore, in 1021. Persianized Turks from what is now central Afghanistan seized Delhi from its Hindu rulers in 1192. By 1323, they had established a sultanate as far south as Madurai, toward

the tip of the peninsula, and there were other sultanates all the way from Gujarat, in the west, to Bengal, in the east.

Today, these conquests are usually perceived as having been made by "Muslims," but medieval Sanskrit inscriptions don't identify the Central Asian invaders by that term. Instead, the newcomers are identified by linguistic and ethnic affiliation, most typically as Turushka—Turks—which suggests that they were not seen primarily in terms of their religious identity. Similarly, although the conquests themselves were marked by carnage and by the destruction of Hindu and Buddhist sites, India soon embraced and transformed the new arrivals. Within a few centuries, a hybrid Indo-Islamic civilization emerged, along with hybrid languages—notably Deccani and Urdu—which mixed the Sanskrit-derived vernaculars of India with Turkish, Persian, and Arabic words.

Eventually, around a fifth of South Asia's population came to identify itself as Muslim. The Sufi mystics associated with the spread of Islam often regarded the Hindu scriptures as divinely inspired. Some even took on the yogic practices of Hindu sadhus, rubbing their bodies with ashes, or hanging upside down while praying. In village folk traditions, the practice of the two faiths came close to blending into one. Hindus would visit the graves of Sufi masters and Muslims would leave offerings at Hindu shrines. Sufis were especially numerous in Punjab and Bengal—the same regions that, centuries later, saw the worst of the violence—and there were mass conversions among the peasants there.

The cultural mixing took place throughout the subcontinent. In medieval Hindu texts from South India, the Sultan of Delhi is sometimes talked about as the incarnation of the god Vishnu. In the seventeenth century, the Mughal crown prince Dara Shikoh had the Bhagavad Gita, perhaps the central text of Hinduism, translated into Persian, and composed a study of Hinduism and Islam, "The Mingling of Two Oceans," which stressed the affinities of the two faiths. Not all Mughal rulers were so open-minded. The atrocities wrought by Dara's bigoted and puritanical brother Aurangzeb have not been forgotten by Hindus. But the last Mughal emperor, enthroned in 1837, wrote that Hinduism and Islam "share the same essence," and his court lived out this ideal at every level.

In the nineteenth century, India was still a place where traditions, languages, and cultures cut across religious groupings, and where people did not define themselves primarily through their religious faith. A Sunni Muslim weaver from Bengal would have had far more in common in his language, his outlook, and his fondness for fish with one of his Hindu colleagues than he would with a Karachi Shia or a Pashtun Sufi from the North-West Frontier.

Many writers persuasively blame the British for the gradual erosion of these shared traditions. As Alex von Tunzelmann observes in her history "Indian Summer," when "the British started to define 'communities' based on religious identity and attach political representation to them,

many Indians stopped accepting the diversity of their own thoughts and began to ask themselves in which of the boxes they belonged." Indeed, the British scholar Yasmin Khan, in her acclaimed history "The Great Partition," judges that Partition "stands testament to the follies of empire, which ruptures community evolution, distorts historical trajectories and forces violent state formation from societies that would otherwise have taken different—and unknowable—paths."

Other assessments, however, emphasize that Partition, far from emerging inevitably out of a policy of divide-and-rule, was largely a contingent development. As late as 1940, it might still have been avoided. Some earlier work, such as that of the British historian Patrick French, in "Liberty or Death," shows how much came down to a clash of personalities among the politicians of the period, particularly between Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League, and Mohandas Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, the two most prominent leaders of the Hindu-dominated Congress Party. All three men were Anglicized lawyers who had received at least part of their education in England. Jinnah and Gandhi were both Gujarati. Potentially, they could have been close allies. But by the early nineteen-forties their relationship had grown so poisonous that they could barely be persuaded to sit in the same room.

At the center of the debates lies the personality of Jinnah, the man most responsible for the creation of Pakistan. In Indian-nationalist accounts, he appears as the villain of the story; for Pakistanis, he is the Father of the Nation. As French points out, "Neither side seems especially keen to claim him as a real human being, the Pakistanis restricting him to an appearance on banknotes in demure Islamic costume." One of the virtues of Hajari's new history is its more balanced portrait of Jinnah. He was certainly a tough, determined negotiator and a chilly personality; the Congress Party politician Sarojini Naidu joked that she needed to put on a fur coat in his presence. Yet Jinnah was in many ways a surprising architect for the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. A staunch secularist, he drank whiskey, rarely went to a mosque, and was clean-shaven and stylish, favoring beautifully cut Savile Row suits and silk ties. Significantly, he chose to marry a non-Muslim woman, the glamorous daughter of a Parsi businessman. She was famous for her revealing saris and for once bringing her husband ham sandwiches on voting day.

Jinnah, far from wishing to introduce religion into South Asian politics, deeply resented the way Gandhi brought spiritual sensibilities into the political discussion, and once told him, as recorded by one colonial governor, that "it was a crime to mix up politics and religion the way he had done." He believed that doing so emboldened religious chauvinists on all sides. Indeed, he had spent the early part of his political career, around the time of the First World War, striving to bring together the Muslim League and the Congress Party. "I say to my Musalman friends: Fear not!" he said, and he described the idea of Hindu domination as "a bogey, put before you by your enemies to frighten you, to scare you away from cooperation and unity, which are essential for the establishment of self-government." In 1916, Jinnah, who, at the time, belonged to both parties, even succeeded in getting them to present the British with a common set of demands, the Lucknow Pact. He was hailed as "the Ambassador of Hindu-Muslim Unity."

But Jinnah felt eclipsed by the rise of Gandhi and Nehru, after the First World War. In December, 1920, he was booed off a Congress Party stage when he insisted on calling his rival "Mr. Gandhi" rather than referring to him by his spiritual title, Mahatma—Great Soul. Throughout the nineteen-twenties and thirties, the mutual dislike grew, and by 1940 Jinnah had steered the Muslim League toward demanding a separate homeland for the Muslim minority of South Asia. This was a position that he had previously opposed, and, according to Hajari, he privately "reassured skeptical colleagues that Partition was only a bargaining chip." Even after his demands for the creation of Pakistan were met, he insisted that his new country would guarantee freedom of religious expression. In August, 1947, in his first address to the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan, he said, "You may belong to any religion, or caste, or creed—that has nothing to do with the business of the State." But it was too late: by the time the speech was delivered, violence between Hindus and Muslims had spiralled beyond anyone's ability to control it.

Hindus and Muslims had begun to turn on each other during the chaos unleashed by the Second World War. In 1942, as the Japanese seized Singapore and Rangoon and advanced rapidly through Burma toward India, the Congress Party began a campaign of civil disobedience, the Quit India Movement, and its leaders, including Gandhi and Nehru, were arrested. While they were in prison, Jinnah, who had billed himself as a loyal ally of the British, consolidated opinion behind him as the best protection of Muslim interests against Hindu dominance. By the time the war was over and the Congress Party leaders were released, Nehru thought that Jinnah represented "an obvious example of the utter lack of the civilised mind," and Gandhi was calling him a "maniac" and "an evil genius."

From that point on, violence on the streets between Hindus and Muslims began to escalate. People moved away from, or were forced out of, mixed neighborhoods and took refuge in increasingly polarized ghettos. Tensions were often heightened by local and regional political leaders. **H. S. Suhrawardy, the ruthless Muslim League Chief Minister of Bengal, made incendiary speeches in Calcutta, provoking rioters against his own Hindu populace and writing in a newspaper that "bloodshed and disorder are not necessarily evil in themselves, if resorted to for a noble cause."**

The first series of widespread religious massacres took place in Calcutta, in 1946, partly as a result of Suhrawardy's incitement. Von Tunzelmann's history relays atrocities witnessed there by the writer Nirad C. Chaudhuri. Chaudhuri described a man tied to the connector box of the tramlines with a small hole drilled in his skull, so that he would bleed to death as slowly as possible. He also wrote about a Hindu mob stripping a fourteen-year-old boy naked to confirm that he was circumcised, and therefore Muslim. The boy was then thrown into a pond and held down with bamboo poles—"a Bengali engineer educated in England noting the time he took to die on his Rolex wristwatch, and wondering how tough the life of a Muslim bastard was." Five thousand people were killed. The American photojournalist Margaret Bourke-White, who had

witnessed the opening of the gates of a Nazi concentration camp a year earlier, wrote that Calcutta's streets "looked like Buchenwald."

As riots spread to other cities and the number of casualties escalated, the leaders of the Congress Party, who had initially opposed Partition, began to see it as the only way to rid themselves of the troublesome Jinnah and his Muslim League. In a speech in April, 1947, Nehru said, "I want that those who stand as an obstacle in our way should go their own way." Likewise, the British realized that they had lost any remaining vestiges of control and began to speed up their exit strategy. On the afternoon of February 20, 1947, the British Prime Minister, Clement Atlee, announced before Parliament that British rule would end on "a date not later than June, 1948." If Nehru and Jinnah could be reconciled by then, power would be transferred to "some form of central Government for British India." If not, they would hand over authority "in such other way

In March, 1947, a glamorous minor royal named Lord Louis Mountbatten flew into Delhi as Britain's final Viceroy, his mission to hand over power and get out of India as quickly as possible. A series of disastrous meetings with an intransigent Jinnah soon convinced him that the Muslim League leader was "a psychopathic case," impervious to negotiation. Worried that, if he didn't move rapidly, Britain might, as Hajari writes, end up "refereeing a civil war," Mountbatten deployed his considerable charm to persuade all the parties to agree to Partition as the only remaining option.

In early June, Mountbatten stunned everyone by announcing August 15, 1947, as the date for the transfer of power—ten months earlier than expected. The reasons for this haste are still the subject of debate, but it is probable that Mountbatten wanted to shock the quarrelling parties into realizing that they were hurtling toward a sectarian precipice. However, the rush only exacerbated the chaos. Cyril Radcliffe, a British judge assigned to draw the borders of the two new states, was given barely forty days to remake the map of South Asia. The borders were finally announced two days *after* India's Independence.

None of the disputants were happy with the compromise that Mountbatten had forced on them. Jinnah, who had succeeded in creating a new country, regarded the truncated state he was given—a slice of India's eastern and western extremities, separated by a thousand miles of Indian territory—as "a maimed, mutilated and moth-eaten" travesty of the land he had fought for. He warned that the partition of Punjab and Bengal "will be sowing the seeds of future serious trouble."

On the evening of August 14, 1947, in the Viceroy's House in New Delhi, Mountbatten and his wife settled down to watch a Bob Hope movie, "My Favorite Brunette." A short distance away, at the bottom of Raisina Hill, in India's Constituent Assembly, Nehru rose to his feet to make his most famous speech. "Long years ago, we made a tryst with destiny," he declaimed. "At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom."

But outside the well-guarded enclaves of New Delhi the horror was well under way. That same evening, as the remaining British officials in Lahore set off for the railway station, they had to pick their way through streets littered with dead bodies. On the platforms, they found the railway staff hosing down pools of blood. Hours earlier, a group of Hindus fleeing the city had been massacred by a Muslim mob as they sat waiting for a train. As the Bombay Express pulled out of Lahore and began its journey south, the officials could see that Punjab was ablaze, with flames rising from village after village.

What followed, especially in Punjab, the principal center of the violence, was one of the great human tragedies of the twentieth century. As Nisid Hajari writes, "Foot caravans of destitute refugees fleeing the violence stretched for 50 miles and more. As the peasants trudged along wearily, mounted guerrillas burst out of the tall crops that lined the road and culled them like sheep. Special refugee trains, filled to bursting when they set out, suffered repeated ambushes along the way. All too often they crossed the border in funereal silence, blood seeping from under their carriage doors."

Within a few months, the landscape of South Asia had changed irrevocably. In 1941, Karachi, designated the first capital of Pakistan, was 47.6 per cent Hindu. Delhi, the capital of independent India, was one-third Muslim. By the end of the decade, almost all the Hindus of Karachi had fled, while two hundred thousand Muslims had been forced out of Delhi. The changes made in a matter of months remain indelible seventy years later.

More than twenty years ago, I visited the novelist Ahmed Ali. Ali was the author of "Twilight in Delhi," which was published, in 1940, with the support of Virginia Woolf and E. M. Forster, and is probably still the finest novel written about the Indian capital. Ali had grown up in the mixed world of old Delhi, but by the time I visited him he was living in exile in Karachi. "The civilization of Delhi came into being through the mingling of two different cultures, Hindu and Muslim," he told me. Now "Delhi is dead. . . . All that made Delhi special has been uprooted and dispersed." He lamented especially the fact that the refinement of Delhi Urdu had been destroyed: "Now the language has shrunk. So many words are lost."

Like Ali, the Bombay-based writer Saadat Hasan Manto saw the creation of Pakistan as both a personal and a communal disaster. The tragedy of Partition, he wrote, was not that there were now two countries instead of one but the realization that "human beings in both countries were slaves, slaves of bigotry . . . slaves of religious passions, slaves of animal instincts and barbarity." The madness he witnessed and the trauma he experienced in the process of leaving Bombay and emigrating to Lahore marked him for the rest of his life. Yet it also transformed him into the supreme master of the Urdu short story. Before Partition, Manto was an essayist, screenwriter, and journalist of varying artistic attainment. Afterward, during several years of frenzied creativity, he became an author worthy of comparison with Chekhov, Zola, and Maupassant—all of whom he translated and adopted as models. Although his work is still little

known outside South Asia, a number of fine new translations—by Aatish Taseer, Matt Reeck, and Aftab Ahmad—promise to bring him a wider audience.

As recently illuminated in Ayesha Jalal's "The Pity of Partition"—Jalal is Manto's great-niece—he was baffled by the logic of Partition. "Despite trying," he wrote, "I could not separate India from Pakistan, and Pakistan from India." Who, he asked, owned the literature that had been written in undivided India? Although he faced criticism and censorship, he wrote obsessively about the sexual violence that accompanied Partition. "When I think of the recovered women, I think only of their bloated bellies—what will happen to those bellies?" he asked. Would the children so conceived "belong to Pakistan or Hindustan?"

The most extraordinary feature of Manto's writing is that, for all his feeling, he never judges. Instead, he urges us to try to understand what is going on in the minds of all his characters, the murderers as well as the murdered, the rapists as well as the raped. In the short story "Colder Than Ice," we enter the bedroom of Ishwar Singh, a Sikh murderer and rapist, who has suffered from impotence ever since his abduction of a beautiful Muslim girl. As he tries to explain his affliction to Kalwant Kaur, his current lover, he tells the story of discovering the girl after breaking into a house and killing her family:

"I could have slashed her throat, but I didn't. . . . I thought she had gone into a faint, so I carried her over my shoulder all the way to the canal which runs outside the city. . . . Then I laid her down on the grass, behind some bushes and . . . first I thought I would shuffle her a bit . . . but then I decided to trump her right away. . . . "

Manto's most celebrated Partition story, "Toba Tek Singh," proceeds from a simple premise, laid out in the opening lines:

Two or three years after the 1947 Partition, it occurred to the governments of India and Pakistan to exchange their lunatics in the same manner as they had exchanged their criminals. The Muslim lunatics in India were to be sent over to Pakistan and the Hindu and Sikh lunatics in Pakistani asylums were to be handed over to India.

It was difficult to say whether the proposal made any sense or not. However, the decision had been taken at the topmost level on both sides.

In a few thousand darkly satirical words, Manto manages to convey that the lunatics are much saner than those making the decision for their removal, and that, as Jalal puts it, "the madness of Partition was far greater than the insanity of all the inmates put together." The tale ends with the eponymous hero stranded between the two borders: "On one side, behind barbed wire, stood together the lunatics of India and on the other side, behind more barbed wire, stood the lunatics of Pakistan. In between, on a bit of earth which had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh."

Manto's life after Partition forms a tragic parallel with the institutional insanity depicted in "Toba Tek Singh." Far from being welcomed in Pakistan, he was disowned as reactionary by its Marxist-leaning literary set. After the publication of "Colder Than Ice," he was charged with obscenity and sentenced to prison with hard labor, although he was acquitted on appeal. The need to earn a living forced Manto into a state of hyper-productivity; for a period in 1951, he was writing a book a month, at the rate of one story a day. Under this stress, he fell into a depression and became an alcoholic. His family had him committed to a mental asylum in an attempt to curb his drinking, but he died of its effects in 1955, at the age of forty-two.

For all the elements of tragic farce in Manto's stories, and the tormented state of mind of Manto himself, the reality of Partition was no less filled with absurdity. Vazira Zamindar's excellent recent study, "The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia," opens with an account of Ghulam Ali, a Muslim from Lucknow, a city in central North India, who specialized in making artificial limbs. He opted to live in India, but at the moment when Partition was announced he happened to be at a military workshop on the Pakistan side of the border. Within months, the two new countries were at war over Kashmir, and Ali was pressed into service by the Pakistani Army and prevented from returning to his home, in India. In 1950, the Army discharged him on the ground that he had become a citizen of India. Yet when he got to the frontier he was not recognized as Indian, and was arrested for entering without a travel permit. In 1951, after serving a prison sentence in India, he was deported back to Pakistan. Six years later, he was still being deported back and forth, shuttling between the prisons and refugee camps of the two new states. His official file closes with the Muslim soldier under arrest in a camp for Hindu prisoners on the Pakistani side of the border.

Ever since 1947, India and Pakistan have nourished a deep-rooted mutual antipathy. They have fought two inconclusive wars over the disputed region of Kashmir—the only Muslim-majority area to remain within India. In 1971, they fought over the secession of East Pakistan, which became Bangladesh. In 1999, after Pakistani troops crossed into an area of Kashmir called Kargil, the two countries came alarmingly close to a nuclear exchange. Despite periodic gestures toward peace negotiations and moments of rapprochement, the Indo-Pak conflict remains the dominant geopolitical reality of the region. In Kashmir, a prolonged insurgency against Indian rule has left thousands dead and still gives rise to intermittent violence. Meanwhile, in Pakistan, where half the female population remains illiterate, defense eats up a fifth of the budget, dwarfing the money available for health, education, infrastructure, and development.

It is easy to understand why Pakistan might feel insecure: India's population, its defense budget, and its economy are seven times as large as Pakistan's. But the route that Pakistan has taken to defend itself against Indian demographic and military superiority has been disastrous for both countries. For more than thirty years, Pakistan's Army and its secret service, the I.S.I., have relied on jihadi proxies to carry out their aims. These groups have been creating as much—if not

more—trouble for Pakistan as they have for the neighbors the I.S.I. hopes to undermine: Afghanistan and India.

Today, both India and Pakistan remain crippled by the narratives built around memories of the crimes of Partition, as politicians (particularly in India) and the military (particularly in Pakistan) continue to stoke the hatreds of 1947 for their own ends. Nisid Hajari ends his book by pointing out that the rivalry between India and Pakistan "is getting more, rather than less, dangerous: the two countries' nuclear arsenals are growing, militant groups are becoming more capable, and rabid media outlets on both sides are shrinking the scope for moderate voices." Moreover, Pakistan, nuclear-armed and deeply unstable, is not a threat only to India; it is now the world's problem, the epicenter of many of today's most alarming security risks. It was out of madrassas in Pakistan that the Taliban emerged. That regime, which was then the most retrograde in modern Islamic history, provided sanctuary to Al Qaeda's leadership even after 9/11.

It is difficult to disagree with Hajari's conclusion: "It is well past time that the heirs to Nehru and Jinnah finally put 1947's furies to rest." But the current picture is not encouraging. In Delhi, a hard-line right-wing government rejects dialogue with Islamabad. Both countries find themselves more vulnerable than ever to religious extremism. In a sense, 1947 has yet to come to an end. ♦