



*Partitions: A Transnational History of Twentieth-Century Territorial Separatism*, edited by Arie M. Dubnov and Laura Robson. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019. 400 pages. \$90.00 cloth, \$30.00 paper, \$30.00 e-book.

REVIEWED BY LEILA FARSAKH

Territorial partitions as a solution to nationalist problems have been a central feature of the international system since the end of World War I. Partition was proposed by the UN for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in 1947, as well as by the British as they negotiated to divide India and Pakistan in that same year. For Palestinian leaders and their supporters today, partition remains the only means for establishing a viable Palestinian state which the international community endorses as legitimate and necessary for peace in the region.

Concretely, though, partition has failed to deliver the end of Israeli occupation or bring about a sovereign Palestine. As Palestinians and political scientists ponder the causes of this failure, they would do well to read Arie M. Dubnov and Laurie Robson's *Partitions*. This edited volume provides a timely and much-needed contribution by situating partition within a rich transnational historical context to delineate its genealogy as much as its limitations. In ten chapters, written by eminent scholars, it traces the links between decolonization and partition while comparing the way the political language of ethnic separation, or nationalism, was translated into territorial divisions under British imperial rule.

Notably, Dubnov and Robson identify how the idea of partition was conceived, circulated, and reformulated—as well as resisted—by focusing on the ways in which the partitions of Ireland, India, and Palestine influenced one another. The book demonstrates that partition was a process, not an event, and one debated and contested by imperial administrators as well as by national leaders trying to articulate new ways for devolving political authority to local populations while resolving national or communal conflicts. The unifying argument that emerges from the various contributors is that partition was the outcome of imperial attempts to maintain power in a changing global era while responding to local demands for political sovereignty. It has always failed to be a viable—let alone optimal—way to protect minorities or ensure state security.

For Palestine, this book provides a number of significant contributions. Half of it is dedicated to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the other half provides illuminating analogies with the South Asian and Irish territorial divisions. Chapter 3, for example, gives further credence to the argument that the Zionists, especially Chaim Weizmann, were the primary actors pushing for partition in Palestine, and worked to bring British leaders on board.<sup>5</sup> Chapters 2, 3, 5, and 6

---

<sup>5</sup> An argument contested by Laila Parsons in this issue. See “Secret Testimony of the Peel Commission (Part I): Underbelly of Empire.”—Ed.

highlight the way imperial administrators, all of whom worked in India and knew Ireland well, were ambivalent about partition and what it actually meant, just as nationalist leaders were not unanimous about the territorial configurations of their political demand for sovereignty. Partition was opposed by humanist Zionists, as chapter 7 shows, specifically by binationalists who were aware of its colonial dimensions and worried that it would sabotage their aspirations for a national collectivity in Palestine. Partition always entails population transfer, unjust and traumatic, often taking on a life of its own, as beautifully discussed in chapters 1, 6, and 9. Chapter 9 is also particularly illuminating for underscoring the role of poets in comprehending history, allowing the reader to appreciate the interdisciplinarity of knowledge production.

A major strength of this volume lies in its exposition of the networks of knowledge production that develop within an imperial order. The book brings forth unheard voices from the Irish press about the Indian question and South Asian debates on the 1937 Peel Commission, showing how the analogy between Ireland, India, and Palestine was being circulated, debated, and readapted by imperial thinkers, national leaders, and the local presses. Chapter 4, for example, recounts how the Irish solution was contested by Indian nationalists but promoted by British administrators. Chapter 5, meanwhile, explains why the analogy between South Asia and Palestine was stressed by Zionists but dreaded by some British foreign officers and opposed by South Asians. The evidence that knowledge and debates circulated throughout colonial spaces rather than moving only one way—from metropole to periphery—is particularly valuable.

One is struck that the Palestinian and Arab press did not seem as engaged with the question of India as the reverse, especially given how colonial practices in India became central to British management of Palestine. However, chapter 8 on Arab liberal intellectuals unearths rich new material on the role of the Arab League's Arab Office (created in 1945). It allows the reader to appreciate its efforts and the work of its leading British-educated intellectuals, such as Albert Hourani, to advance the case for Palestine in Western circles, demonstrating both the lucidity and the limited political impact of their arguments. But missing is any exploration of why Palestinian or Arab scholars do not explore the centrality of South Asian colonial history to better understand their own. A Palestinian transnational perspective that would redress the bias of always studying Palestine in relation to the West and would allow us to look instead at the analogies and interactions with the Global South is beyond the scope of this volume. It is undoubtedly warranted and would greatly enhance future research on Palestine.

While Dubnov and Robson's book expects its readers to have some prior knowledge of the core details of Irish, Palestinian, and South Asian modern history, its analysis and transnational perspective are precious. It makes clear that partition is an imperial construct, the outcome of competing visions and power struggles over the meaning of political rights and their physical manifestation in a changing world. These questions are still with us today. Everyone interested in Palestine and its future would benefit from learning from the history of partition in order not to repeat its tragic consequences.

---

Leila Farsakh is associate professor and chair of the Political Science Department at the University of Massachusetts Boston. She is the author, among other works, of *Palestinian Labour Migration to Israel: Labour, Land and Occupation*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2012).

---