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# **Exploring the legacy of partition through inherited memories**

**Deborah Nixon<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>University of Technology Sydney

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*This article explores the intergenerational legacy of the Partition of India, drawing on family stories and insights from Holocaust studies. The study applies narrative inquiry, utilising interviews with soldiers who acted as ‘neutral’ escorts in British Indian Army Gurkha regiments during 1947. As India gained independence, targeted violence erupted among different religious and ethnic groups, particularly Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus, in what Brass (2003) describes as ‘retributive genocide’. Research situates this tragedy as partly a result of the departure by the British, and the hasty drawing of borderlines to create Pakistan. This resulted in violence and chaos in the Punjab and Bengal regions. These accounts shed light on a lesser-explored aspect of history, counterbalancing dominant narratives of complete British abandonment. I hold this story as the daughter of a subaltern officer who served with the Gurkhas in 1947, whose generation has all but disappeared.*

## **Introduction**

This article explores the interplay between trauma, memory and the experience of the Partition of India, passed to me as a second-generation inheritor of my father’s first-hand accounts from India in 1947. Unlike the other soldiers I interviewed, my father, Leslie Nixon, was no stranger to India. He was born into a working-class railway family who had lived in India for several generations. The aim of this article is not to compare the Holocaust and Partition in terms of magnitude or outcome, but to apply theories based on the manner in which it is remembered in an intimate family history. In addition, the scale of suffering and the number of casualties of those displaced from ancestral homes cannot be compared to the same experience as the soldiers on whose interviews this article is predicated. When referring to the Holocaust, the Naqba and Partition, Werbner writes: ‘The similarity lies in the traumas their memory has generated and in their narrative afterlife, expressed in collective memorialisation’ (2009: 442). The literature about Partition variously characterises it as ‘ethnic cleansing’ (Ahmed 2012; Khan 2007: 128; Pandey 2001; Talbot & Singh 2009), as gendered (Talbot 2000; Khan 2007; Das 2007; Talbot 2009), as ‘retributive genocide’ (Brass 2003: 70), as planned (Talbot & Singh 2009) and as religious, political and territorial. Pandey argues that there were three Partitions: the demand for a separate Muslim state, the splitting from Muslim majority areas and the violence (2001: 29-38). It is now memorialised in the Partition Museum in Amritsar and online through the 1947 Partition Archive, both of which I have contributed to. This article explores the enduring impact of the Partition of India on subsequent generations, with a particular focus on the personal narratives that shape its collective remembrance. It is based on qualitative research using four unstructured interviews of first-hand accounts of Partition. Three participants were interviewed at the Gurkha Museum in Winchester UK and interviews with my father were conducted over a number of occasions in Australia. Despite the unstructured nature of the interviews, my father – whose story I know intimately – never deviates from a practised narrative, stating ‘these memories are burned into my memory’, along with sights and sounds he was unable to forget.

## **Remembering**

In India there has only recently been an effort to memorialise 1947. In Amritsar, Punjab, for example, once a place with a significant Muslim population critically diminished in 1947 through evacuations and killings, there now exists a Partition Museum which opened in 2017. My first response after visiting was that it favoured a victim- based approach to the Partition; however, it does contribute to the public remembering of Partition. According to Svensson, even if it is ‘consistent with Indian nationalist historiography since 1947’ (2022: 8), it also exists as an aporetic response to the ongoing conflict between India and Pakistan that includes dissensus in the relationship. This is a ‘people’s museum’ (Partition Museum n.d) which draws on eyewitness accounts from an ever-diminishing number of people who were there. It includes photographs and objects that people took with them as they moved across new borders.

The situation in 1947 was particularly brutal in the North-West of Indian Punjab where the Muslim population was its most dense. The focus of this article is on this region and my connection to it through my father’s role during Partition. According to the 1941 census, the Muslim population was close to a majority in key towns such as Jalandhar, Ludhiana and Amritsar. There was a sizeable Muslim population close to the border and this is a major reason why the violence was particularly intense there. As pointed out by Roy (2019: 1), interest in witnesses and survivors of the Partition of India has been, ‘energised by the broadening debate on the Holocaust in the 1980s, [and] oral histories of Partition 1947 compiled by feminist scholars’ (Das 2007; Butalia 1998; Menon & Bhasin 1998). I add that one elision from many accounts of the behaviour of the retreating British government is the role that Gurkha escorts played during the Partition. However, Butalia acknowledges: ‘For many who travelled from Pakistan to India and in the other direction at the time the only safe escorts were the Gurkha regiments seen as somehow more neutral than the Hindu or Muslim armies’ (1998: 79). My interest is derived, in large part, from the experience of growing up as the child of a soldier who was also born and brought up in a railway colony in India. Unlike British born officers, my father’s connection to India, and ironically the railways (considering their repurposing in 1947) was deep and generational.

More recently, in 2023 on a family trip to India I noted the names of towns signposted between Chandigarh in Punjab through Uttar Pradesh to Dharamshala in Himachal. I recalled these towns were mentioned by my father and others I interviewed, who had escorted displaced people across newly divided Punjab; towns such as Ludhiana, Ambala, Patiala and Jalandhar. These places punctuate the journey towards Pathankot, Amritsar and now the border with Pakistan. Seeing the signs on the busy highway as cars, buses, motorbikes and people jostled for space, I recalled descriptions of the killings that occurred in these areas, related to me by ex-Gurkha officers, who were aged in their early 20s in 1947. A huge responsibility lay with these very young men as the bulk of the British Army withdrew from India. Their remit in the British Indian Army was to act as an ‘aid to the civil powers’, in other words to remain behind until the end of 1947 to support local police in safeguarding people during the population transfer between India and Pakistan. This was a near impossible task that led to the deaths of between 1-2 million people; no final figures were recorded. The retelling of this experience is not to establish it as ‘truth’. Rather, I seek to explore how memory and experience create the past that pervades living history. My contention is that the past is never dead; rather its spectre haunts the present, giving it a

contingent, unsettled quality. To this purpose, these accounts evocatively capture the violence and chaos of 1947 and add to an understanding of the Partition from a different perspective. Growing up in suburban Adelaide in the '60s and '70s was about as remote as possible from 1947 India, and yet it was ever present in our house through objects, photographs and my father's experience and behaviour.

### **Hinge generation and postmemory**

In an article for *The Conversation*, Australian author Raymond Gaita comments on his late son-in-law Mark Baker's work, *The fiftieth gate*. Gaita (2023) writes that Baker 'reflected on how the testimonial culture in Holocaust studies has spread to awareness of other genocides'. I find this pertinent to the work I have done in recovering stories of Partition. However, the term genocide in relation to India in 1947 departs from state-driven models. Sayantani argues for a re-examination of the Indian Partition beyond 'Eurocentric and state-oriented definitions of genocide in order to create a more effective approach towards understanding mass violence in decolonizing and postcolonial societies' (2022: 334). Through writing about ground-level experiences of Partition I, like many in the 'hinge generation' (Hirsch 2008: 103), have assumed custodianship of a story; these stories passed on have become postmemory (Greenberg 2005; Hirsch 2008). On the family trip to India, as we passed through the previously mentioned North Indian towns, I experienced recognition, though I had never visited the towns before. I knew that these memories were not mine; they were memories of memories. I am mindful of the line between the affective responses I experienced and where I am placed in relation to them. I am part of the hinge generation, a direct descendent of a person who was affected by a mass upheaval or trauma both as a civilian and as a soldier. I take 'hinge generation' to mean a link between a person who experienced a trauma first-hand and one who tries to understand the impact it had on those who were there (ibid).

In relation to children of Holocaust survivors, Hirsch posits the concept of 'postmemory', albeit 'with some hesitation, conscious that the prefix "post" could imply that we are beyond memory'. It is differentiated from memory by 'generational distance and from history by deep personal connection' (1997: 22). Hirsch continues:

[Postmemory is] a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated, not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation ... Postmemory characterises the experience of those who grew up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation and shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated. (ibid: 22)

Hirsch argues that postmemory work is not related to absence or a void. It is 'as full or as empty, certainly as constructed, as memory itself' (ibid). Similarly, the stories that are told by those who lived through Partition, to their daughters and sons, and then what happens to these stories when those children grow up and become adults, is the kind of creative postmemory work that Greenberg (2005) considers as he discusses silence, forgetting and trauma. His insightful discussion of the way Partition is remembered in India (and Palestine),

not just by those who experienced it directly, but also as it is passed on through stories and to the next generation, resonates with my own experience. Postmemory research work also provides for ‘the public working through of personal and family issues’ (Greenberg 2005: 264). In this way this story sits at the juncture of both private and public histories and articulates the connection as complementary.

For many years my father did not talk about what happened in 1947. He was sparing us as children from these stories but, when they did emerge, I felt this partly explained his hyper-vigilant behaviour and his worry about my research trips to India. Shielding children from ‘the burden of the past’ is what Jo Kalowski (ABC 2023) felt her parents were doing in relation to their experience of the Holocaust. It is a common characteristic of parents who have been through war. In addition, parents can display unusual behaviours. My father suffered from startle reflex in response to loud or sharp noises and from recurring nightmares of the sound of jackals, because to him they sounded like people being killed. After our conversations about the Partition, he rang me several times to ask if I knew what jackals sounded like and explained the noise to me. It never left him.

Even though Gurka escorts were at less risk of being killed than the people they were safeguarding, they were sometimes targeted by the Indian Army. When referring to the transport of refugees to Nagrota in what is now Himachal Pradesh, my father expressed a naïve underestimation of the feelings of those he identified as being ‘Indian Army soldiers’. ‘We were often threatened, I thought they [Indians] would be scared of us’ (2007 interview transcript). He soon learnt that ‘they’ [Indians] were not afraid to attack and thereafter he arranged for his men to ride on top of the trains that ran from Nagrota to Pathankot as they travelled through Punjab. He explained that he and some of his men sat in the tender of the train, a car that is reserved for carrying coal and water close to the front because it was elevated and they ‘got a clear line of fire’; the other section escorts of Gurkhas covered the middle and back of the train. He said his area of the Punjab was not as bad as the area around Amritsar, which is closer to the border with Pakistan (Talbot 2006). The ambiguity of his role, the paradox of his position as a soldier in peace time and the residual trauma he experienced when recalling some events impacted his inability to rethink the past. His recall is of flashpoints and when pushed, he said it was so chaotic, he simply could not remember what happened in between.

### **Acting as an aid to the civil power**

The crucial difference in the role of the army in 1947 was that Partition did not occur under wartime conditions. The army was acting as an aid to the civil powers; in other words, supporting local police and emergency services such as they were at this time. The whole of Punjab was classified as ‘a disturbed area under the provisions of the Punjab safety Ordinance’ (Gurkha Regimental Association Newsletter of 1947). In Himachal most of the local police force was comprised of Muslims; however, they had to leave when the violence began and this created a void in law enforcement. There were very few police left in the area; however 50,000 Muslim refugees needed to be first evacuated to centres set up on train routes at Pathankot and Amritsar. There were explicit notes in army training materials stating that, ‘Aid to the civil power is not war’. Officers and men were instructed to restore law and order, first through persuasion and patience, then through

the police and lastly by using minimum military force. This was to be achieved as set out in the 'Platoon Commander's Guide to Duties in the Aid to the Civil Power' (Marston 2009: 473). The army was to act with the police to maintain order but this soon proved to be almost impossible in areas that were most affected by evacuations. Often the lack of confirmed or reliable intelligence was cited as a reason for misleading information regarding what the army was meant to do; for example, the remaining officers left in India during Partition had to operate from this invidious position of tumult.

The gazette *Bugle and Kukri* produced a special edition in 2006 to allow those who served with the Gurkhas in the Punjab to recount their experiences. It was noted at the time of its publication that even in official regimental histories, Gurkha involvement in the Partition was barely mentioned. More recently the contribution made by Gurkhas outside their brief deployment in the Punjab Boundary Force and more generally throughout the Punjab during Partition is included in Marston's (ibid) history of the Indian Army; however, the Boundary force was poorly managed and had all but collapsed by the time it was needed. This failure overshadows the work carried out by the functioning parts of the British Indian Army that included the 1st Gurkhas.

In a review of several Holocaust memoirs, Tumarkin questions whether, in relation to the survivors of German concentration camps, 'we are forgetting what we must remember...not just the facts...but the eviscerating *essence* of the experience' (2012: 23). This evokes the intangible of being actively engaged in the horror and at the same time of being outside it, of not understanding it at the time and of recalling a sense of it retrospectively.

### **The task: 'No one knew anything'**

The bald facts are a testament to the magnitude of this tragic migration. It is estimated that 673 refugee trains ran from August to November 1947, carrying over 2,800,000 people. Approximately 12 million people crossed between the new Pakistan and India (Butalia 1998: 76). The numbers of casualties and refugees are not agreed on but vary between 2.3–2.8 million refugees relocated on trains and 8–12 million people displaced in both directions. The number of deaths is unknown but varies between 500,000 to 1 million. The consensus in much of the literature about the role of the military during Partition is that it was an abject failure and that British soldiers were ordered to stay in their barracks before being demobilised out of India or that British soldiers were instructed to save only British civilians (Khan 2007: 128-129). However, British Indian Gurkha officers in command of Nepali soldiers were instructed to 'carry on', as is evidenced in an entry in the Journal of the 1st K.G.Vs.O. Gurkha Rifles (Malaun Regiment) April 1947:

As an interim measure we are carrying on entirely with British officers until 31st Dec 1947 and have been allowed to keep sufficient officers for the whole regiment including British service regulars and attached officers until that date. (1947: 18)

The number of refugees moving through the Punjab was overwhelming for the number of officers left in charge of the Gurkha regiments. For example, the Eastern Punjab Railway line to Lahore with armed escorts carried between 3,000 and 9,500 refugees at any one time.

The numbers on foot were vast ‘almost beyond belief’ (Khan 2007: 156). For example, it was recorded in November 1947 that ‘a column of approximately 40,000 Muslim refugees, swelled to 70,000, left Rohtak on 29 October on its way to Ferozabad’ (Mountbatten Papers, MB1-D276). As riots began to tear Lahore apart in August 1947, von Tunzelmann, in her narrative history of the last years of the Raj, comments that the only help available was from ‘200 Gurkhas stationed nearby under the command of an inexperienced British captain who was only 20 years old’ (2007: 3). There were scattered mentions of the role of Gurkhas in the broader context of the British Indian Army during Partition but recently there is an expansion in the literature about the role of the Indian Army, most particularly in Marston’s (2014) insightful analysis. Marston takes into account the enormous pressure on the army to function, after the Second World War, in the civil disruption and the political chaos that accompanied the path to Independence and Partition.

### **A soldier’s eye view: First-person accounts**

In the following, I include eyewitness accounts that capture the sense, even *the essence* of the chaos of 1947 with a spare immediacy. Lt Colonel (Retd) Reggie Twelvetrees, an officer in the 1/6 Gurkhas, describes the situation from his base at Montgomery in Pakistan. The other account is based on an interview conducted with Lt Colonel (Retd) Reynolds from the 2nd/9th Gurkha Rifles. Reynolds also wrote a series of letters to his mother that chronicle his time in the Punjab, serving from 31 July 1947 in Ambala until the last letter written in Delhi on 9 November 1947. Lt Colonel (Retd) Peter Reeve from the 1st/4th Gurkha Rifles told me of his experience of working with Meo refugees south of Delhi. All three interviewees helped me contextualise the scale of my father’s experience.

In a letter written to another officer in November 1947, describing his situation in Montgomery towards the end of the main population transfers, Twelvetrees refers to his concern for families split up during attempts to move refugees to different camps. Twelvetrees describes the terrible task of selecting 3,000 refugees out of 10,000 to be relocated to different camps, one at Lahore and one at Fazilka. He likens his situation to that of a warder in Belsen: ‘So many inhuman things are happening that a little humanity in trying to reunite split families is the least I can be allowed to do.’

Likewise, as a 19-year-old British officer, Lt Colonel (Retd) Ralph Reynolds sent a letter on 29 August 1947 to his mother describing the situation in Ludhiana. He writes of seeing the badly mutilated bodies of a small group of five people and expresses frustration at the reluctance of the local police to assist in burying the bodies but that he managed to enlist the help of some Pathans. He notes to his mother in all his letters: ‘When I say dead people I shall always mean Muslims, by the way’ (Reynolds Letter 29 August 1947). Some Pathans assisted in the burial from a group of ‘several thousand with all their donkeys mules and baggage ... We had no

idea if they were friendly or hostile so we went in for a *bat chit* [dialogue]'. As it turns out, the Pathans were labourers from a building project on the Bhakra Dam. Reynolds reports that he heard heavy rifle fire coming from a Muslim village on the outskirts of Ludhiana, which had been declared 'dangerously disturbed'. Reynolds writes that he could hear machine gun fire, streets on fire and 'piles of bodies lay about' (ibid.)

Hindus and Sikhs had attacked the village. Reynolds notes that General Rees, Commander of the short-lived Punjab Boundary Force (PBF), was having trouble keeping Sikhs from joining bands of police raiding villages and that the Gurkhas were the most reliable escorts they had. Many of the soldiers in the PBF were recruited from the Punjab and naturally could not maintain an unbiased attitude towards the area. However, as mentioned above, Marston contends that the Indian Army acted in a manner that was 'like a rock in an angry sea' (2014: 351), suggesting that it was the Punjab police who 'could be communally focussed' (ibid: 328). This is borne out by Reynolds' experience described below.

In a letter dated 3 November 1947, on his last train trip, Reynolds describes in detail the agonising transportation of refugees on a slow 28-coach train that was travelling from Ambala to Attari, approximately 280 kilometres. He was the only British officer in charge of four or five Gurkha officers and 120 Gurkha subordinates escorting 9,500 refugees; it took nearly 30 hours with no food or water for the refugees to complete the journey. I had to keep reminding myself that Reynolds was 19 years old at the time. He tried to provide some protection but the number of people who needed assistance rendered the task impossible. Both escorts and refugees were under constant threat of attack from 'Sikhs and Hindus who were looting and killing the Muslims'. Arriving late at their destination, the Subedar (superior officer) who was supposed to meet them had come and gone. In another incident he described his frustration when trying to find some assistance with the removal of several dead Muslims and to his consternation found the local police to be completely unhelpful, virtually turning their backs on him. Reynolds was also in a Gurkha regiment, the 2/9th that was going to go to India rather than 'empire'. This was announced to Reynolds's deep consternation at Independence. However, with his usual pragmatism his letters end with a note: 'However we are here now so we must say '2/9th *moriyo chha*, 2/6th *jai* [the 2/9th is dead, long live the 2/6th].'

An interview with Lt Colonel (Retd) Peter Reeve, formerly with the 4th Gurkha Rifles, an ex-Gurkha officer, revealed the scale of the killings at the Palwal camps about 18 kilometres south of Delhi. The camps were set up to protect Meo refugees; Reeve showed me photographs of a massacre that had taken place. It was a terrible image: bodies of women and children who had been stabbed to death. Another photograph showed tents set up to house officers; the encampment looked piteously small compared to the number of predominantly Meo refugees seeking protection from attack. The photograph taken by Reeve at Palwal was used as proof that more support was needed to protect Meo refugees from attacks by Hindus because Hindu communities surrounded them on three sides. However, extra support was not forthcoming. Reeve told me in our interview that the Meos were being slaughtered as early as May 1946 by groups of up to 700 Hindus. The situation worsened after Mountbatten's public announcement regarding Partition in June 1947 and Reeve expressed bewilderment



at the mishandling of security, saying that in the army ‘everyone hated him [Mountbatten]’. Like other regiments, he was ordered out of the area. He said leaving refugee camps ‘was really sad’; ‘you really felt like you were bailing out’. This is a frustration that is echoed in the literature and points more to the magnitude of the task than to military incompetence.

For the soldiers who remained during Partition it was a horrifying journey, and one is reminded again and again through reading first- hand accounts and secondary sources that reliable information was extremely hard to come by. Writing from Ambala in July, Reynolds refers to rumours about the movement of his battalion to Secunderabad (Reynolds Letter 31/7/47) which did not eventuate. Amongst all the confusion he includes a mundane comparison of shopping centres in Ambala and Lahore and the heavy rains that had begun to fall with the escalating number of casualties. Reflecting on the impact of Partition in Dehra Dun, Lt Colonel Wilson reported in 1949 that: ‘Another difficulty that faced the army in restoring order was the almost total lack of reliable intelligence ... rumours were rife, and a string of panicky and inaccurate police accounts of often non-existent occurrences poured in without ceasing’ (Wilson Letter, 2/3/49 held at the Gurkha Museum, Winchester).

### **There are no final figures**

It is agreed by most scholars in the field of Partition studies that the number of people who died during Partition will never be properly calculated. Pandey (2001: 67) argues that whatever official records were kept, the number of deaths during Partition remains a mystery as a result of the reluctance of ‘successive regimes to release documents’. Talbot agrees that because no official records were kept at the time, the figures vary greatly from 200,000 to 500,000 (Khosla cited in Talbot 2009: 62). Others have figures of up to 800,000 or a million (ibid). Just as there is no final figure on fatalities, ultimately there are as many Partitions as there were people involved in the migration, displacements, abductions, death and loss: the suffering remains unquantifiable.

Various political drivers of the violence are scrutinised but it is not denied that religion was a major factor. Khan (2007: 20) points out that religious ‘differences’ between people were exacerbated through colonial practices that saturated ordinary life with regulations separating religious groups. Khan quotes Gandhi’s lamentation at the indignity of having to bear ‘the shame that is peculiarly Indian’ (ibid) of these rules, imposed by colonial powers, predicated on a simplistic and essentialised interpretation of what it meant to be Hindu or Muslim. This fed into the fear surrounding what would happen on 15 August. Retrospectively it is argued that the build-up throughout the years leading to 1947 should have served as an indicator of what would happen, but for ordinary people it was a terrible shock. The fierceness of the clashes between different groups of migrating people followed on from a tragic trajectory of violent outbreaks that also connected to months of uncertainty, rumours and sporadic ‘disturbances’ across North India, radiating out from riots in Calcutta on Direct Action Day in May 1946 (Talbot 2009: 68). Violence is the grain of modernity: the consequence of an attempt to provide a division of land that, ironically, was intended to ameliorate the Muslim League’s desires

for a homeland. At the time no proper account was taken of how the populations already living in those areas would respond to the new borderlands (Khan 2007; Pandey 2001). Religious differences were a direct cause of much of the violence; they contributed to the overall web of political decision-making and the drawing of the border, which has not presaged well for the troubled relationship between contemporary India and Pakistan.

### **The use of trains**

In 1947 the image of desperately overcrowded steam trains became irrevocably entwined with that of the moving population, as unsafe vehicles of despair and tragedy particularly in the North-West of India where some of the most intense and violent transfers of populations occurred. Almost everything the railways were intended for was reversed; the previously reliable safety of the space of the carriage was invaded and became dangerous and deadly. The train trips undertaken at Partition created a schism with old lives, a transitioning away from the past via an anxious and terrifying journey to an uncertain future, if survived. Kerr refers to trains used during the Partition as 'trains of death' (2007: 134) and similarly a chapter by Aguiar is entitled 'Partition and the death train' (2011: 73). In almost all accounts of the transportation of refugees by train, the death rate is highlighted over the survival rate. Religious identities were intensified, depending on the direction the trains were travelling as they approached and crossed borderlines (Aguiar 2011: 85). This is most poignantly exemplified by the stories that Butalia (1998) recorded with women who were often targets of the most brutal attacks and abductions. Aguiar argues that the train had become the 'dominant icon' for representing the violence of Partition and 'the journey into modern nationhood' (2011: 84). Indeed, Aguiar (2011: 99) comments that the reversal of the progressive trains and modernity narrative changed 'the forward paradigm of modernity'.

What worked against trains in 1947 were the very characteristics that made them so 'modern' and efficient at other times. This included carrying large numbers of people, travelling in a fixed direction and running on a predictable timetable. People were energised by fear into leaking information and subsequently into a forced complicity with local militias, but this was also balanced by acts of compassion. These acts of saving life sometimes involved protecting servants, such as occurred when one Anglo-Indian family suddenly found themselves and their Hindu cook living in Pakistan. The head of the family spoke to the Muslims who had come to take the cook away and managed to talk sense into them (McMenamin & Birch 2010: 222). Unfortunately, however, as Brass (2003: 90) points out, cases of compassion remain as a 'chimera' to the viciousness of the acts that were committed by people from different groups on each other. Apportioning blame to certain groups deemed responsible for committing more murders than others is not supported by reliable statistics.

The experience of train drivers receives some attention from oral historian McMenamin (2006), who concludes that their exclusion from the killing is related to a 'level of goodwill' extended to them by Hindus and Muslims. Anglo-Indian communities were performing essential services in the railways and telegraph throughout 1947. Similarly, British officers were not usually the main targets for attacks on trains.

### **The final situation in North India**

In 1947 in the ‘disturbed area’ of Punjab (Gurkha Regimental Association Newsletter of 1947), there were virtually no police left, as 90 per cent of the police force was Muslim and there were 50,000 Muslim refugees in the valley that needed to be first evacuated to centres set up at Yol, Jawalamukli, Kotwali, Nurpur, Pathankot and Amritsar. The camp at Yol (south of Dharamsala) was an Italian POW camp that housed 10,000 refugees, aided by nurses from the Canadian mission. From Yol, refugees were walked to Nagrota, a railway siding, and put on a small gauge train to Pathankot where they were then handed over to the 7/10th Gurkha Rifles for the next part of their journey towards Pakistan. News about what was happening elsewhere in India and in the Punjab was hard to come by. My father said he was unaware of the scale of the killings happening further down the line but eventually news came through, from those closer to the new border with Pakistan, of massacres and attacks on trains. I asked him how he felt about putting people onto trains that would eventually have to cross the border into more disturbed zones and he simply replied: ‘We didn’t know how bad it was and, in any case, we had no choice’ (2006 Leslie Nixon Interview). For the Gurkha officers and their men, ‘safe conduct of refugees’ meant being constantly under threat of attack, moving to India or Pakistan and then moving back across the same territory. The graphic description below from an officer in Jalandhar is of a grim reality:

I was given the task of ensuring the safe passage of thousands of Muslim refugees moving by day along the Jullundur-Amritsar road and railway lines .... Our responsibility stretched for about 60 miles ... The company area was encircled by barbed wire and carefully guarded. The surrounding countryside was littered with the corpses of refugees and carcasses, the victims of violence, cholera, starvation and exhaustion. (Lt Colonel Henry Burrows 1/4 GR *Bugles and Kukri* 2006 : 130)

### **The Holocaust is invoked**

The Partition and the Holocaust differ in all but a few features: the use of trains and their association with death and misery. However, the Holocaust is often invoked to register the scale of the casualties and attacks on trains in the Punjab that were, simply put, carrying Muslims if travelling west and Hindus if travelling east. Partition is often coupled with the Holocaust because, as Kamra writes, it is a ‘moment that forms a singular breach of contract with civilised ideas’ (2002: 19). The collapse of order, displacement and violence, ‘the moment’ lasted for an agonising length of time. The choice of the word ‘event’ casts a net of speed and singularity over Partition but as a process it has resonated for decades in the memories of those who were there, not only the millions of displaced Indians but of domiciled Europeans, British and Anglo-Indians who were living there at the time. For those who served in the army in frontier forces like the Gurkhas, it was an experience that spanned five months of the full migration and population transfers; it meant going into ‘disturbed areas’ again and again. The use of the adjective ‘disturbed’, a term employed by the military, seems a mild choice to make when describing the reality of the situation. As Kamra (2002) stresses, experiences of the trauma of Partition

were impacted by where people were positioned, both socially and geographically, at the time and in life afterwards.

## Conclusion

In 1947, the colonial rhetoric of civilisation and progress was shattered by the violence of Partition as modern secular spaces such as trains were repurposed, and a counter narrative of modernity emerged from the wreckage (Aguiar 2011). Nepali Gurkha escorts, despite being Hindu, and their British officers, tried to remain neutral as they attempted to provide safe transport for those moving across North India. Through my father I was granted an intimate portrait of this tragedy; his memories are indelibly connected to my memories of him and the experiences he had. The narratives of soldiers stationed with Gurkha regiments in 1947, travelling between India and Pakistan, provide a poignant lens through which to examine the consequences of this historic event. Recent scholarship, such as Sayantani's work (2022), enables a view of the Partition period beyond the confines of Eurocentric and state-centric definitions of genocide. Trauma, memory and generational connections play a pivotal role in shaping the enduring legacy of the Partition of India. Linking personal narratives, historical research and public memorialisation serve as a testament to the complexities of defining moments in history and the way they are remembered and passed on through families, historians, public rhetoric and those who still live in contested partitioned zones.

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## Note

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### **Note on the contributor**

Dr Deborah Nixon is a Lecturer at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS). She has a background in anthropology, applied linguistics and language education. Her active research interests include memory studies, material culture and the cartographic consequences of the Partition of India. Her work extends to analysing representations and memorialisation of 1947 in institutions of public pedagogy such as museums. She takes a multimodal approach to publishing and has disseminated her research to a wide readership through academic articles, the Indian Memory Project, The 1947 Partition Archive and podcasts on the ABC.

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