

Welcome Remarks as President AAWH to 6th Conference at Doha

As President of the Asian Association of World Historians, which has been a leader in promoting world history, I would like to thank our host, the Doha Institute of Graduate Studies, for convening our 6th international conference.

This prestigious conference was typically held every three years in East Asia. The holding of the international conference this year in Doha, Qatar, in West Asia, and earlier in New Delhi, South Asia, now makes the association truly pan-Asian.

We have received a diverse range of responses to our open call for papers, extending well beyond our specified themes, foregrounding global history from the Gulf's perspective. The event is in a hybrid format, enabling participation from around the world and making it a truly global event with a strong Asian foundation.

Global perspective on Decolonisation and Partition

Many people ask me about what we at AAWH mean by world history. Let me illustrate this by examining one subject, Partition, from the perspective of world history or a comparative, transnational, and global approach. In this approach, the break-ups of Palestine and India are not particular to the history of that country but can be traced back to partitions in earlier colonies such as Ireland.¹

The imperial power, in this case, Britain, viewed Indian history as one marked by a religious divide. Furthermore, the colonial state's policies of divide and rule perpetuated a false division up to the country's Partition. The British administrators' decision to partition India and, a little later, Palestine, was rooted in their earlier experience in Ireland. The British perspective on conflict in

¹ The work of T.G. Fraser, *Partition in Ireland, India and Palestine*, London, 1985, was followed up by Joe Cleary's book *Literature, Partition and the Nation State: Culture and Conflict in Ireland, Israel and Palestine*, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Palestine and their administration of the mandate were rooted in their earlier colonial experiences, notably in Ireland.²

The historical continuity between Irish and Indian policy on Partition is evident.³ Some of the principals from the British side were the same: Austen Chamberlain and Lord Birkenhead. Then, the Anglo-Irish Treaty served as the drawing board for designing post-war frameworks within which the empire was to be dismantled. Another example was that of British officials, including Lord Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of India, who looked to Ireland as a precedent for handling challenges and formulating strategies. Last but not least was (something I have discussed in my book *Independence and Partition*), the Commonwealth solution to post-imperial interests, wherein the strategic interests of the metropolis were sought to be maintained by retaining ex-colonies in the Commonwealth.⁴ Ireland again provided the template.⁵

Some scholars have examined the historical context and consequences of the Partitions in Ireland, India, Cyprus, and Palestine, contrasting them with the situation in Bosnia. Partition comes across as a strategy of both territorial control and rapid disengagement from colonies. "Divide and quit" was the term used by senior British officials, such as Penderel Moon, to describe the strategy for partitioning the Indian subcontinent. These were ethnically mixed and dispersed populations, and the decision to Partition was not only a response to the demand for self-determination (a demand that was nurtured and encouraged by the colonial state itself for the purpose of weakening the national movement, it was on account of colonial powers like Britain seeking to withdraw

² Victor Kattan, "The partitions of India and Palestine and the dawn of majority rule in Africa and Asia" in Kattan and Ranjan, *The Breakup of India and Palestine: The Causes and Legacies of Partition*, p.172.

³ Kate O'Malley, " 'Indian Ulsterisation'—Ireland, Inrather, a consequence whoof that looked India, and Partition: The Infection of Example?" in *Partitions: A Transnational History of Twentieth-Century Territorial Separatism*, edited by Arie M. Dubnov and Laura Robson, pp. 111-127.

⁴ Mahajan, *Independence and Partition*, Section titled Commonwealth Solution to Post-Imperial Interests, Chapter titled Divide and Quit, pp.177-180

⁵ Kate O'Malley, " 'Indian Ulsterisation'" pp. 123-24.

quickly from the mess that they themselves had created. For example, within a few weeks of Partition, India and Pakistan were involved in a war in Kashmir in 1947-1948. It worked, in a limited way, from the point of view of the imperial power, for making a speedy exit. A divided India and a pliant Pakistan suited both Britain and other Western powers during the Cold War.

For world historians, the partition of Palestine was not an aberration. It was a long-standing imperial modus operandi.⁶ Historians focusing on the colony alone often overlook the fact that Partition had been planned for a long time. The haste with which the last days were wrapped, in India, as in Palestine, was convenient in giving the impression that the British were not responsible for the violence that ensued. In this way, Britain's global image and prestige in the long term were protected by the imperial power, coming across as overwhelmed in the short term by the forces of violence set loose by the masses of people.

There are now several themes that are studied within the rubric of world history, including migrations, gender, economy, and trade, among others. The histories of empire and colonialism are connected within the South for obvious reasons. But given that it was mainly the North that colonised the South, the connections are global. And in some ways, these histories did not end with the liberation movements of the twentieth century - unequal exchanges and exploitation have taken on other forms in the twenty-first century in the global village, as we like to call it.

With this brief introduction to world history, I would like to welcome you to the 6th International Conference of the AAWH in Doha.

Join us as we engage with these critical narratives and shape the future of historical discourse.

⁶ Penny Sinanoglou, *Partitioning Palestine: British Policymaking at the End of Empire*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019, p.286