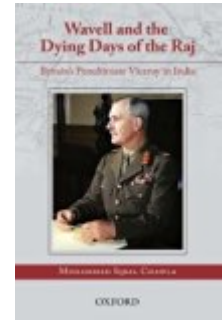


Mohammad Iqbal Chawla. *Wavell and the Dying Days of the Raj: Britain's Penultimate Viceroy in India.* Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011. xi + 293 pp. \$25.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-906275-1.



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Published on H-Asia (January, 2014)

Commissioned by Sumit Guha (The University of Texas at Austin)

Lord Wavell was destined to be the second-to-last viceroy of British India. A seasoned British imperialist soldier and an Old India hand, he was appointed to the post in 1943 and remained in office until March 1947 when his flamboyant successor Lord Mountbatten took over. Mountbatten succeeded Wavell in order to supervise the liquidation of the Raj. For various reasons, including his dashing personality and an interesting wife, Mountbatten has managed to attract more than his share of attention from scholars. In contrast, Wavell, who tried in vain to keep India united between 1943 and 1947, is almost a forgotten figure of history.

No doubt, history students know much more about the Mountbatten Plan than the Wavell Plan. The public, in general, has forgotten Wavell and the plans that he devised for India in the twilight of the Raj. In this book, Mohammad Iqbal Chawla highlights Wavell's plans, which became increasingly impossible to execute in communally charged postwar India. By the time Wavell became the viceroy of Britain's most important

colony, the sun had set on the British Empire. The two world wars exhausted Britain and made it financially and politically subservient to the United States. In 1943, Britain did not have the political, military, and financial means to ensure a smooth and peaceful transfer of power to the Indians in the troubled and anxiety-ridden 1940s. The appointment of a veteran soldier as the viceroy of India, after the Quit India rebellion was quelled by the Raj in 1942, failed to produce a negotiated political settlement between the British and various Indian parties.

Chawla examines the two plans drafted by Wavell, the Wavell Plan and the Breakdown Plan. During the Second World War, the British realized that they could not avoid the political decolonization of India in the immediate future and that this process was fraught with several dangers which British colonialism itself had produced in India. Having kept India divided, the British now wanted to leave it united in the overall interest of the British Commonwealth after World War II. *Ultimately in India both imperialism and nationalism*

failed. Chawla analyzes the failures of the Cripps Mission, Wavell Plan, and Cabinet Mission Plan in relation to the fluid political situation in India during the 1940s. He underscores the shortcomings of the various parties involved in the tortuous political events that led to India's partition in 1947, and he takes the Indian National Congress, in particular, to task for its intransigence on the Muslim question. This volume makes it clear that without understanding the political frustration of Wavell we cannot comprehend the confusing story of Indian independence and partition.

The book, a revised doctoral dissertation published by a Pakistani academic, adds to the enormous literature available on the immediate history of the partition of British India in 1947. This literature includes excellent books by such ideologically diverse scholars as David Page, Anita Inder Singh, Ayesha Jalal, Penderel Moon, Mark Tully, Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, A .G. Noorani, Ian Talbot, Patrick French, and others. The works by these scholars are well known, well cited, and easily available. Nonetheless Chawla's narrative, written from the perspective of the Muslim League, refreshes our memory of India's partition and the making of Pakistan. While dealing with the failure of the Rajaji Formula, Gandhi-Jinnah Talks, Shimla Conference, Wavell Plan, and Cabinet Mission Plan, this book does not fail to blame Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and the Congress for the political impasse created in India during and after the Second World War. The author makes it clear that the Cabinet Mission Plan was the last chance for keeping India united and the Congress, led by Nehru in 1946, was responsible for its demise. The Muslim League initially accepted the provinces grouping scheme suggested by the Cabinet Mission because the measure of grouping Muslim majority provinces in India in the east and west was conducive to its idea of creating Pakistan in the foreseeable future. Gandhi's ambivalence toward the plan and Nehru's intemperate public utterances on the question forced Muhammad Ali Jinnah to repudi-

ate the league's earlier stand on the plan and declare the Direct Action Day on August 16, 1946. There was no turning back after that.

Beyond the copious specialized historical literature on the 1940s, we must also not forget that the partition of Pakistan and its intractable contemporary political problems as well as the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971 have problematized the two nation theory. But all this has left Chawla's discussion of the Indian partition of 1947 unaffected. This book is about the failure of Wavell, and thereby ultimately the whole of British policy, to keep India united in the wake of the Second World War. "Wavell thought of India as a single geographic unit and, therefore, wished to maintain its unity. This led him not only to denounce but even attempt to derail the demand for Pakistan. Initially he thought of it simply as a bargaining counter and believed that its creation could be avoided. However, with the passage of time, after he had witnessed the rapidly rising support for the Pakistan demand and increasing popularity of *Jinnah as the sole spokesman of the Muslims*, he came to the conclusion that it needed to be taken very seriously and dealt with accordingly" (emphasis added) (pp. 262-263).

While dealing with the political questions raised by the 1947 transfer of power and partition in the Indian subcontinent, Pakistani scholars blame the Congress for the violent partition of 1947. This book is not an exception.

Several ironies underlined the moment of Indian freedom and partition. Since its inception, and especially after the political watershed of 1857, British political and educational policies had encouraged religious, caste, and regional divisions among Indians. The success of British colonialism was predicated on these divisions and the maintenance of the princely states as a bulwark against Indian unity and nationalism. The political fruits of this policy of "divide and rule" ripened in the 1920s and 1930s, threatening India with civil war, political dissolution, and cultural

destruction in the near future. Nonetheless the British, hoist with their own petard in 1945 as they were, dreamt of keeping India united within the Commonwealth after World War II.

This book highlights the fact that Wavell opposed the partition of India, drafted the Wavell Plan, and called the Shimla Conference (1945) to resolve the political differences among the Indian leaders. The Wavell Plan envisaged an enlarged all-Indian executive council, with the Indians holding the important portfolios hitherto denied to them by the Raj, which would work within the constitutional framework provided by the Government of India Act of 1935. Wavell wanted to keep India united by making the Indian elites cooperate in the governance of the country, but the plan failed because the Indians disagreed on the question of representation within the proposed council. On the one hand, B. R. Ambedkar was averse to the Congress nominating members of the “Depressed Castes” to the council and Jinnah desired a monopoly right to select Muslim members of the council. Both leaders, deeply suspicious of Gandhi, were aware of the clout the Congress had with the British. Gandhi, on the other hand, had always opposed any move to split the Hindu vote along caste lines, and his presence in Shimla caused great discomfort to his detractors. Wavell found Jinnah’s position unreasonable, and the Shimla Conference failed to resolve the communal and caste deadlock in India. Chawla tells us once again in admirable detail why that happened, although his league-friendly narrative does not explain why Jinnah should have been given the prerogative of selecting the Muslim members to the viceroy’s executive council. Were there no other parties representative of Indian Muslim opinion in 1945? Would Muslim representatives to the Congress have necessarily been Muslim “poster boys”? These questions are not taken up for discussion in this book.

The second irony of Indian partition must be seen in the failure of the Congress to keep the

country united despite being the most popular political party of the period. The creation of Pakistan was a slap in the face of the theoretical secular nationalism championed by the Congress. It is well known that during the 1930s and 1940s, the Congress increasingly came under the influence of the Hindu right wing and alienated the Muslim masses. At the same time, its radical sounding anti-*zamindari* (anti-landlord) rhetoric alarmed the Muslim landlords in both British and princely India. This widened the ideological appeal of Pakistan and forged a unity among Muslims cutting across class lines. By the time Wavell began to grapple with the Indian problem, a substantial number of Muslims had started supporting the idea of Pakistan. The Muslim parties that were apprehensive of partition were swept away by the violent orgies of communalism, which began with the Direct Action Day in August 1946. Chawla documents the process that led to this from 1943 to 1947.

The third irony of Indian partition must be seen in the success and failure of the All-India Muslim League even as Jinnah secured the state of Pakistan. Jinnah was a liberal democrat who used religious nationalism to carve his place in history. Potential readers of this book should be reminded that the elitist moderate lawyer, who personally disliked religiosity and the popularization of politics, had once been an important Congress leader. In 1906, the future Qaid-e-Azam had scoffed at the founding of the organization that he would one day lead and plunge into unprecedented bloodshed. In 1947, did Jinnah and the league get the Pakistan they dreamt of or was the moment of his victory the undoing of all that the liberal democrat secretly cherished? This book offers no comment on this question. Ultimately Jinnah’s dream of a secular Pakistan perished with him, and first the generals and later the fanatics nurtured by them and the Central Intelligence Agency took hold of Pakistan. Pakistan was little more than an idea in Cambridge before the Congress launched the ill-conceived Quit India rebellion in

1942. Chawla is right in asserting that this “was a big tactical mistake which Jinnah exploited to the maximum for his party’s benefit” (p. 43). Jinnah’s notion of a modern somewhat secular Pakistan, despite the league’s electoral victories in Punjab and Bengal in 1946, obviously did not have deep social or institutional roots and hence did not last very long after his death.

All books have limitations and this one might be faulted by a prejudiced reviewer for being in parts an apology for the Muslim League and Jinnah. The strengths of the book lie in its organization of chapters and the rich narrative of the political events often initiated by Wavell in the troubled 1940s. The book could have been written with greater self-reflection on the part of the author. It often conveys the impression that Chawla did his best not to stray too far from a doctoral dissertation written in defense of the two nation theory. The author’s decision to study Wavell’s efforts to solve the Indian political problem between 1943 and 1947 is in itself commendable. Not many students know that the Wavell Plan was discussed, and put to the sword, at the Shimla Conference. Very few among us know the details of Wavell’s Breakdown Plan—a final plan that Wavell drafted to protect the interest of the British and the Muslim majority provinces if the Indian Empire had utterly disintegrated in 1947. Books based on good doctoral dissertations are usually thorough and I am sure Chawla was lauded by his examiners for his painstaking research. It is perhaps too much to expect a Pakistani establishment historian to be critical enough of Jinnah who, after all, was a politician as cynical as any other. In conclusion, this volume is recommended to anyone interested in the history of the partition of British India.

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Citation: Anirudh Deshpande. Review of Chawla, Mohammad Iqbal. *Wavell and the Dying Days of the Raj: Britain's Penultimate Viceroy in India*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. January, 2014.

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