

Cartography and Scientific Empire Building



An Opening Anecdote

Like the rulers of Ayutthaya, which preceded the Kingdom of Siam in present-day Thailand, the Rama kings of Siam sent regular tributary missions to the Celestial Empire of China. The Ming Dynasty, and later Qing Dynasty, granted them in return not only trading privileges and legitimacy, but also security guarantees. Somewhat ironically, while Melaka might have needed protection from Siam, as we saw in the previous episode, Siam needed protection from its other neighbors, and it looked to the same guarantor, China. The famous Qing Bannermen were prepared to respond to any attack on an enfeoffed, or officially recognized, vassal state, like Siam. Over the years, fulfilling their obligations, the Qing launched several military expeditions through the mountainous highlands of Southeast Asia to punish the Konbaung Dynasty of Burma for invading Siam. Although the Qing Bannerman, who mostly hailed from the frigid regions of northeastern China, mostly failed in their campaigns through the tropical jungles of Burma, their presence alone demonstrated a willingness to use force.

CARTOGRAPHY AND SCIENTIFIC EMPIRE BUILDING

AN OPENING ANECDOTE

BIG PICTURE QUESTIONS

WHOSE FRONTIER?

ZOMIA, ANARCHISTS, AND AMORPHOUS STATES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

SIAM'S CONUNDRUM

WHEN MAPS KILL

CONCLUSIONS

However, when the Qing Dynasty floundered against British invaders during the Opium War less than a century later, Siamese leaders began to reconsider their faith in the tributary “system.” The brief conflict between the Qing Dynasty and the British Empire resulted in the Treaty of Nanking, which was the first of many “unequal treaties” for China. This humiliating treaty, in turn, marked a turning point for many Southeast Asian states that had historically looked to China for legitimacy and protection. Recognizing the changing tide, the newly-crowned King Rama IV, or King Mongkut, sent the last Siamese tributary mission to China in 1853 to mark his coronation. On the way back to Siam, King Mongkut’s emissaries escaped an attack by rebel forces in a rapidly deteriorating Chinese interior and dialogued with Sir John Bowring, who would later negotiate the so-called Bowring Treaty with Siam, in British-controlled Hong Kong. With the benefit of hindsight, 1853 seems like a clear-cut turning point when Siam turned from China to Britain, or from the tributary “system” to Westphalian “system,” but the past is never so ordered.

Historian Junko Koizumi has shown that both King Mongkut and King Chulalongkorn, his son and successor, continued to closely monitor and massage relations with China, which continued to demand tribute. Siamese leaders felt conflicted as a relatively weak country wedged not just between competing empires but between contradictory “systems” of interaction. However, like the Dutch, who had mastered the art of tributary relations while championing a Westphalian style of global interaction several centuries earlier, the Siamese pursued a multi-pronged strategy to preserve their kingdom. At the same time that they maintained stable relations with China, they adopted numerous new tools, like cartography, or the science of mapmaking, to lay claim to territory that had previously been viewed as a “frontier” in interior Southeast Asia. Before we turn to that story, however, we will first explore the meaning of “frontier” and the puzzle of perspective.

Key Terms:

Ayutthaya

King Chulalongkorn
(Rama V)

King Mongkut (Rama
IV)

Cartography

Red Cloud (Mañpíya
Lúta)

Reservations

Prince Devawongse
Vaoprakar

Plaek Phibunsongkhram
(Phibun)

Zomia

Mandala

Partition



**Portrait of Siamese State
Official, from tribute
records of Qing Dynasty**



Big-Picture Questions

1. In what ways are “frontiers” a myth or a fiction? Who might describe a territory as a frontier, and for what reason?
2. How did Siamese and British leaders use mapmaking and treaties to claim territory? Who was more successful and why?
3. What types of arguments do maps and their makers make? What types of legacies do they leave?
4. The nineteenth century marked an era of “high” imperialism. While some historians question the necessity of distinguishing this type of imperialism from earlier forms, it is still a productive exercise to compare moments in the past. How did British and Siamese imperialism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries compare with Chinese and Portuguese “imperialism” in the sixteenth century?

Whose Frontier?

As of July 2022, Merriam-Webster defined a frontier as either a “border between two countries” or a “region that forms the margin of settled and developed territory.” Both definitions are interesting but highly problematic. The first, which relies on the concept of a “border,” in theory could be a line on a map, which is technically not a space at all. As we will discuss below, however, borders themselves could also be much more amorphous and undefined spaces, which has led some to call them “borderlands.” The second definition of border is unhelpful because it relies on inherently subjective terms like “developed” and “settled.” What does it mean to be “developed”? “Settled”? On the whole, the definitions from Merriam-Webster probably do more to obscure knowledge than provide any clarity. In fact, they are rooted more in the realms of myth and fiction than any historical event or place.

What do you think of when you think of a frontier? Perhaps a red dusty canyon with a lonely horseperson riding into the sunset? Perhaps a group of adventurers in a dangerous and wild pine forest wilderness with guns loaded and threatening wildlife all about? Perhaps an isolated oasis town that links together the boundless deserts and grasslands around it? Regardless of what comes to mind, it is probably drawn from some sort of fictive place imagined by writers or filmmakers. In ways, these fictional tropes of the “frontier” have come to dominate reality. With this in mind, we will attempt to step away from the myths to explore areas that, while some might apply the label “frontier” to them, hardly fit the Merriam-Webster definition described above. We will move beyond the definitions and beyond the fictions to examine these dynamic, innovative, and populated spaces.



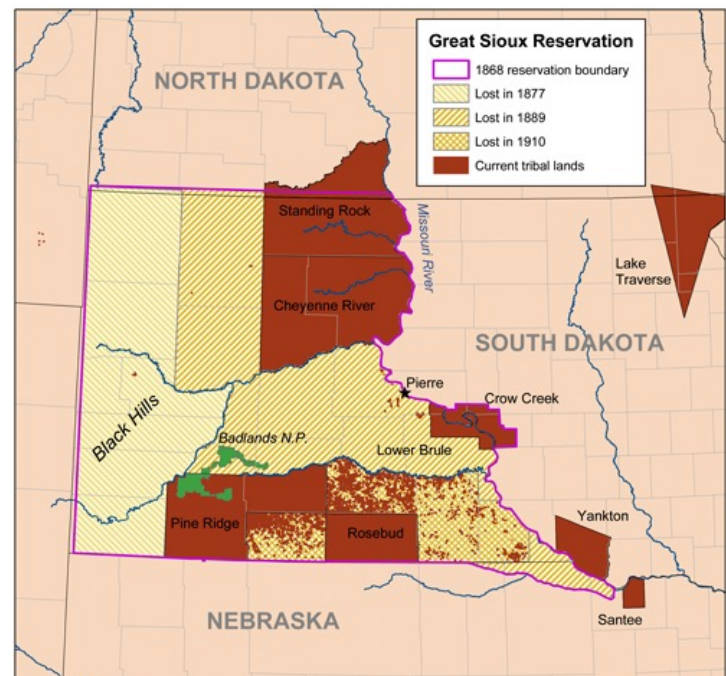
Red Cloud, c. 1880

Before we head to Southeast Asia, we will take a brief detour through an area often associated with “frontiers,” the North American west. Chief Red Cloud of the Oglala Lakota (Sioux) was born here in the great plains during a time of white colonial expansion in 1822. In his youth, he gained a reputation as a fearless fighter and charismatic leader. Around the time of the United States Civil War, after white prospectors discovered gold in what would become Montana, a flood of white colonists entered Lakota territory. In response, Red Cloud and his allies took up arms and began a war of resistance to defend their land, which, according to the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851 that they had signed, belonged to them and the other nations of the great plains.

Red Cloud initially succeeded in stemming the tide of white expansion with a series of military victories, including the destruction of several American platoons in the Battle of a Hundred Slain. This put him in a good position to negotiate an extended Fort Laramie Treaty in 1868, which more or less preserved Lakota territorial claims. In his victory, however, Red Cloud, just like Kings Mongkut and Chulalongkorn of Siam, recognized the changing tides and agreed to travel to Washington DC to negotiate a more lasting peace. Though not yet officially a Chief, Red Cloud played an important role drafting a settlement. However, the equilibrium once again broke down as gold, which someone discovered in the Black Hills, once again changed the calculus of all.

For their part, the white colonial invaders employed several tools to acquire territory and destabilize the Lakota government. First, they used the treaty, which brought with it an aura of authority and blind justice. Those treaties, however, could easily be “renegotiated” after one side improved their negotiating position. The second tool white colonists used was the destruction of shared resources. In the case of the great plains, that involved the hunting, nearly to extinction, of buffalo herds, which did not follow any boundaries negotiated by humans.

The destruction of shared resources, of course, is a microcosm of the problem all humans face in an era of climate change today, which is a topic we will return to in the final episode of this module. Preserving resources in one place will accomplish little if others exploit those same resources elsewhere. The final tool that the colonists developed was the map. Along with white ranchers and farmers traveled prospectors who mapped the Black Hills and identified potential mineral deposits. These three tools, which became something of an imperial toolkit, were applied around the world, including Southeast Asia.



Sioux Reservation lands



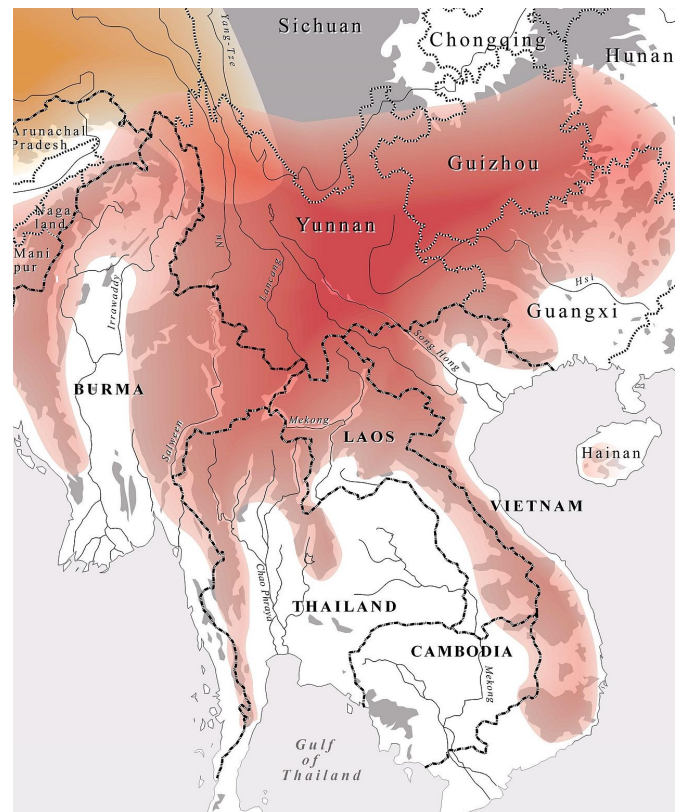
The Red Cloud Delegation, with Red Cloud in the center

Before we turn to Southeast Asia, however, let us provide a brief conclusion for Chief Red Cloud. Unlike his more famous and confrontational colleagues, Chiefs Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull, Red Cloud sat out what has been called the Sioux War of 1876-1877. He also remained mostly silent when the famous Ghost Dance movement shook the nation. He gained a reputation as a moderate or pragmatist who sought to preserve his land and protect his people through negotiation. He attempted, to the best of his ability, to counter white encroachment by using their own tools against them, but this achieved only moderate success. Leaders in Siam were slightly more successful at using colonial tools to protect their state from colonial occupation, but they also experienced their share of setbacks.

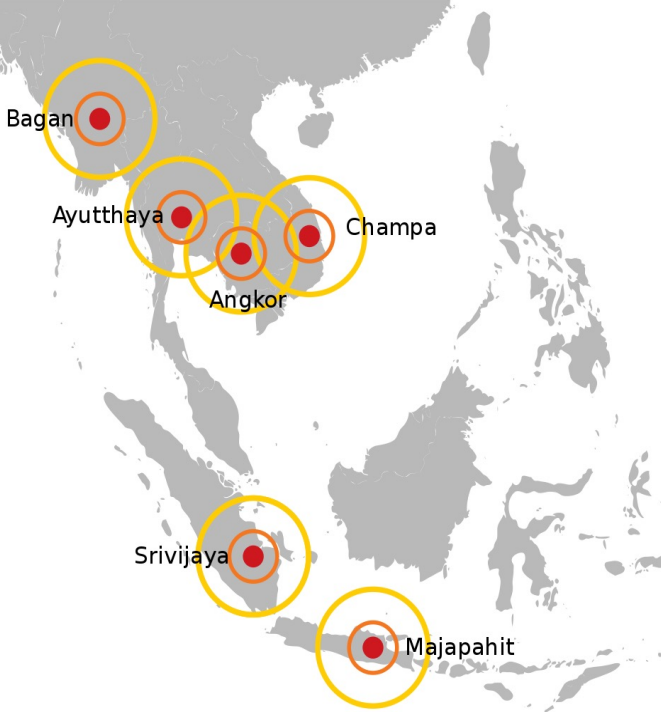
Zomia, Anarchists, and Amorphous States in Southeast Asia

Many Siamese leaders viewed the rugged Thai highlands and the lush jungles of the Malay Peninsula as a wild frontier, but that is not unexpected for the ocean-facing traders who ruled from the capital city of Bangkok. Ironically enough, the British likely viewed not just Siam, but all of Southeast Asia as a frontier in their overseas empire, which centered on their crown colony of Hindustan, or India in South Asia. One person's frontier was another person's metropole or center. What has led people to call Southeast Asia a frontier, and why does it matter?

Anthropologist James Scott famously attributes an anarchist, escapist ideology or belief system to upland Southeast Asian people of what he and others have called "Zomia," a mountainous region that spans highland Central, East, and Southeast Asia. In *The Art of Not Being Governed*, Scott projects an idealism among highland Southeast Asians whom he views as yearning to escape the tyranny of states. In more measured terms, other scholars of Southeast Asia have highlighted how historical states and empires in the entire region, including insular or island Southeast Asia pioneered flexibility and openness.



Map of Southeast Asian social space



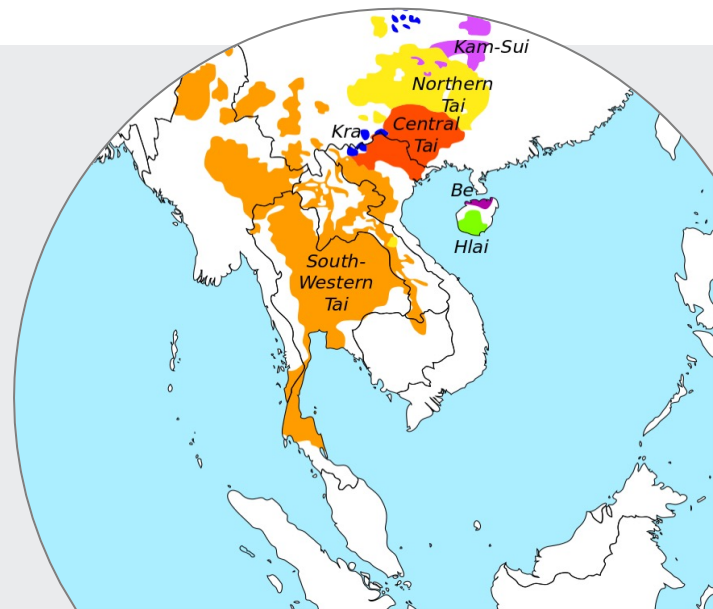
Southeast Asian historical Mandalas

Historian O.W. Wolters and many since have described states in Southeast Asia as “*mandalas*,” a Sanskrit term for a type of Buddhist spiritual geometric pattern. Wolters defines a *mandala* as an “unstable political situation in a vaguely definable geographical area without fixed boundaries and where smaller centers tended to look in all directions for security.” Although some have critiqued Wolters’ definition of a *mandala*, it provides a good starting point. *Mandalas* were dispersed and overlapping states that relied on kinship or family alliances and that centered on linked trading cities or entrepôts. States spread over and through one another, and they moved, expanded, and shrank over time. Some states, like Ayutthaya, which preceded Siam, at various times found themselves part of the Angkorian *mandala* in present-day Cambodia, while at other times acted autonomously, for instance.

If you traveled to a small market town in Southeast Asia during the eighteenth century and asked people there to identify in which country they stood, they likely would have been confused by the question. They might have spoken Thai, paid taxes to a local Konbaung Dynasty official, and followed Islam. Their neighbor in the same town, on the other hand, might have spoken Khmer, paid taxes to a local Siamese official, and followed Buddhism. *Mandalas* in Southeast Asia often overlapped, and groups living in the same town might have affiliated with completely different states, religions, and kinship organizations. If you were to look at a contemporary map of areas that speak Tai-Kadai languages, of which Thai is a major branch, for instance, you would find dispersed enclaves that spread across Southeast Asia all the way into southwestern China.

One might describe *mandalas* as practicing a form of overlapping sovereignty, which is an inherently contradictory term that points to the inadequacy of words like “sovereignty.” In addition to states sprawling over one another, they also hosted people who moved back and forth and between and among the *mandalas* as well. And these migrations were often gendered. It was mostly men who sailed back and forth between entrepôts to engage in trade. Women, on the other hand, often remained in the cities of their birth where they controlled the property and acted as critical moneylenders and go-betweens. It was not only states but also families and individuals that defied simple boundaries.

This relationship with space made it difficult for people from Southeast Asia to understand and communicate with Europeans, who brought a completely different language and understanding toward space, as well as unique tools to enforce their understanding. Leaders of *mandalas* in Southeast Asia faced the same stark choice that Chief Red Cloud did when they confronted a different type of white colonist with lethal military technologies and ideological tools to take land and resources: adjust or resist.



Map of Tai-Kadai Languages



Siam's Conundrum

King Mongkut at center with British officials

Before he became King Rama IV, Mongkut had shown interest in astronomy and geography, which he had studied during his unusual training at a Buddhist Monastery. While some in the Siamese court sought to separate Buddhism into a spiritual realm and reserve science for the physical realm, Mongkut believed the two thought systems strengthened one another and belonged together, which is why he founded the reformist Dhammayut Buddhist sect. When he became king, he encouraged his royal relatives to learn more about science and technology, but Buddhism remained a key part of his identity.

He exhibited his faith in both Buddhism and science when he invited high-ranking European and Siamese officials to the "frontier" outpost of Wako in the northern wilderness of Siam to observe a solar eclipse, which he had calculated using the latest scientific techniques. When the overcast skies suddenly cleared in Wako after persistent overcast, allowing for a spectacular viewing of the eclipse on August 18, 1868, King Mongkut felt as though divine intervention had allowed the scientific breakthrough. He largely succeeded in uniting Buddhist astrology and scientific astronomy, in the process gaining the upper hand against conservative astrologers in his own court. This would be his last expedition, however, as he ended up contracting malaria during the trip and dying soon after his return. His son, Chulalongkorn, who also caught the fever during the trip, survived and succeeded him, becoming King Rama V.

Kings Mongkut and Chulalongkorn faced a conundrum that many in the nineteenth century also faced: how to reconcile different and sometimes contradictory belief systems. Mongkut's embrace and reinterpretation of both Buddhism and astronomy mirrored the Siamese leader's engagement with space. He recognized that he would need to respect *mandalas* and tribute while leveraging new beliefs if he wanted to keep Siam intact. His predecessors had prepared him well to make the pivot. When British and Indian forces launched a massive and expensive expedition against Siam's neighbor, the Konbaung Dynasty in Burma back in 1824, occupying territories that had sizeable Thai communities, Siamese leaders knew they had to learn more about the newcomers. When the British setup border crossings across what used to be the diffused and open area of the Siamese *mandala*, this need became all the more pressing.



King Rama IV, Mongkut, 1851

In 1826, King Mongkut's brother and predecessor, King Rama III, and Henry Burney, a representative of the English East India Company, signed a treaty of friendship, which appears in primary source collection three. The treaty shows how British and Siamese officials struggled to fully understand one another. Article III, which stipulated that borders were to be established by consulting local chiefs, likely frustrated British cartographers, but it made a lot of sense for a *mandala*. A few years later, adhering to the norms of the tributary "system," Siam fought a proxy war with Vietnam over Cambodia, which both countries viewed as a vassal state. Then, after King Mongkut came to power, and after British power had grown with a successful campaign against China in the Opium War and a successful second campaign against the Konbaung Dynasty in Burma, and with the French power expanding on their eastern flank with their incremental conquest of the united territories they called "Indochina," Siam leaned further into their pivot.



King Chulalongkorn, Rama V

King Chulalongkorn and his influential foreign minister Prince Devawongse Varoprakar picked up the reins where Mongkut had left off, pushing through a series of radical reforms that established a new cabinet, abolished slavery, redesigned the judicial system, established a public school system, and dispatched European- and Philippine-trained cartographers and foresters to map their state. Prince Devawongse, who revamped Siam's foreign ministry, studied French and English methods of claiming territory and negotiated with both countries to officially demarcate Siam's eastern and western borders in 1907 and 1909.

Siamese strategic accommodation and expert negotiation allowed them to preserve their sovereignty in an era when sovereignty suddenly stopped overlapping. Succeeding leaders went one step further and introduced a full indoctrination program to articulate and fortify Thai identity. In the buildup to World War II, during an era of rising fascism, Plaek Phibunsongkhram, or Phibun, as he was generally known, implemented a comprehensive program to spread "Thainess."



He went so far as to rename the country to Thailand, or land of the Thai people. In so doing, Phibun and other Thai leaders became colonizers themselves, squeezing out the numerous non-Thai communities within the newly demarcated borders of Siam and then Thailand. Siamese leaders transitioned from a *mandala* to a nation state, succeeding in "preserving" their country, but along the way, they absorbed and colonized many *mandalas* and non-Thai people as well. Thai leaders increasingly applied the same policies that the British and French had applied to Siam to incorporate and assimilate their own "frontiers."

Phibun opening the Victory Monument on National Day, 1942

When Maps Kill

As we just saw in the Siam example, imperialism and mapmaking went hand in hand. Many of the borders around the world today came from imperial designs from the past. In 1884 and 1885, for instance, representatives from some countries in Europe gathered in Berlin to divide up the continent of Africa. Except for Liberia and Ethiopia, which, like Siam, were able to maintain their independence, all territory within Africa was divided between European colonial powers. Many of the borders those colonizing powers established still exist to this day. Of course, European colonizers cared little for historical precedent or linguistic, religious, or cultural commonalities when drawing those lines, which has led to border disputes, forced migrations, and open war in the years since decolonization. Nothing captures these tensions and their consequences better than the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947.



Map of the British Empire in India, 1909

The English East India Company and later the British Crown had slowly accumulated territory and expanded their influence over the Indian subcontinent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The First War of Indian Independence, which the British sometimes call the Sepoy Rebellion after the Indian soldiers who initiated the campaign, marked a turning point when British forces began to administer the colony more directly. While British colonial officials probably viewed Burma and Siam in Southeast Asia as something of a “frontier,” they viewed India as the “Crown Jewel” of their empire. In ways, the British Empire was also an Indian Empire because soldiers and bureaucrats from the region populated the governments and armed forces of many “British” colonies.

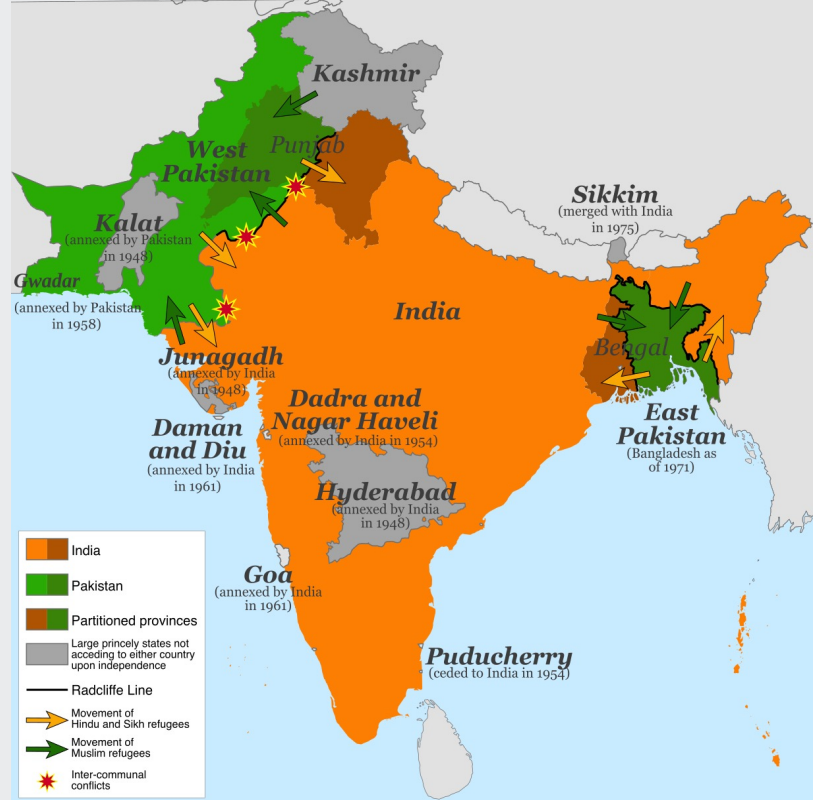
By the early twentieth century, many Indian soldiers, lawyers, and bureaucrats began to organize and call for autonomy and independence. Leaders, including the famous Mohandas K. Gandhi, organized country-wide mass protests in the 1920s and 1930s that helped create a national consciousness and political program. So, when World War II reached its conclusion, independence leaders in India gained their freedom from prison, and a new Labour government came to power in Britain, the stage was set for independence. Leaders in a weakened post-war Britain and their counterparts in a comparably unscathed India, however, desired to end the relationship as quickly as possible.



Marchers in Bangalore protest British rule

Map of the Partition of India, 1947

With the support of the Indian National Congress, British officials arranged for independence in 1947. They added a wrinkle to the situation, however, because they had agreed with the Muslim League, a political party that nominally represented Muslim interests in India, in negotiations that took place during the war, to allow for a separate Muslim-majority nation. The long-united colony was set to split into two brand new nations at independence: one a secular, but Hindu-majority nation, and the other a Muslim nation. This decision, of course, complicated the push for independence because residents in the colony had no idea in which country they would end up.



British officials decided to divide the country using two methods. In semi-independent princely states, they opted for a referendum to allow people to choose which country they would join. In British-administered territory, however, officials decided to hire a cartographer known as Cyril Radcliffe, who had never traveled to India, to draft a new boundary. They gave him five weeks. Using census and survey data, Radcliffe drew the line, dividing the linguistically and culturally connected provinces of Bengal and Punjab into two separate nation states. When independence arrived on August 15, 1947, the line had not yet been revealed, leaving many people unsure for which country they were celebrating independence!

Tragedy ensued as millions of people picked up their belongings and relocated to the new nations to which they thought they would be safest. New government officials and soldiers representing these nations rushed in to attempt to bring order as seas of migrating and fleeing individuals grew increasingly anxious, but those officials had little time to prepare with the quick transfer of power. Untold violence unfolded as anxious people responded to rumors and perceived slights with steadily increasing violent counter-responses. Long-time neighbors who found solace in different gods turned on one another, unleashing unfathomable bloodshed. Families were torn apart, and communities torn asunder.



Police in Delhi conduct arms searches, fearing anti-Partition violence, 1947

When the dust settled, an estimated half million to one million people had died in the mass killings, and many more had found themselves without a home. Historian Yasmin Khan describes how these killings “bridged the barbaric and calculatedly modern.” The new nation of Pakistan itself was divided into two disconnected territories with a large swath of India in between. Eventually the divided country of Pakistan, after a bloody civil war, broke up into two nations, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The result of this ad hoc map and poorly thought-out plan led to untold suffering that continues to reverberate to this day as Indian and Pakistani soldiers regularly engage in combat in the high altitudes of the contested region of Kashmir. For many, the scars of Partition have never healed.



Displaced persons during the Partition of Punjab, India, 1947

Conclusions

However, we should not feel bound by history. When Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, Kenyan Ambassador to the UN Martin Kimani drew from Kenya’s imperialized past to condemn the attack. He said, “at independence, had we chosen to pursue states on the basis of ethnic, racial or religious homogeneity, we would still be waging bloody wars these many decades later.” He recognized the long legacy of imperialism and mapmaking, but he offered a hopeful counterpoint by highlighting work done in Kenya and the African Union to find peace and unity with existing state boundaries. He reminded us all of the important lesson that while it is critical to learn about and understand injustices in the past, it is equally important that we are not dragged down by the very historical legacies we study. We have the power to challenge the wisdom of the past and explore creative ways to share and utilize space in the future.



But, of course, the past still offers us many valuable lessons, and we should consider them with an open and unburdened mind. If Chief Red Cloud, King Mongkut, King Chulalongkorn, and Prince Devawongse Varoprakar could adjust their worldviews and completely restructure their understanding of and relationship with space, then we too can adjust how we live in and share space today. Aim to strike a balance between finding inspiration from the past and appreciating the uniqueness of the present.

Kenyan Ambassador to the UN, Martin Kimani, 2016

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Field Marshal P. Phibunsongkhram during state ceremony of the opening of the Vicotry Monument on the National Day, June 24, 1942, Office of the Prime Minister of Thailand, Public Domain, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Phap_Mueang_Thai_\(1943,_p_024\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Phap_Mueang_Thai_(1943,_p_024).jpg)

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