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The “Durbar Settlement” and the Union of South Africa: Railways and the Logic of Imperial Administration, 1905-1914

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Short Title: The “Durbar Settlement” and the Union of South Africa

Abstract: This paper examines the development of railway policy in two British imperial theaters – India and South Africa – and its use in consolidating imperial power as administration shifted from Calcutta to Delhi and the South African colonies merged into a single Union. It argues that colonial administrations conceived of railways as a tool that could stabilize and consolidate colonial political institutions as well as placate colonial subjects.

Keywords: colonialism, imperialism, empire, railroads, Britain, India, South Africa, Herbert Baker, Edwin Lutyens

“The monuments of a dynasty are proportionate to its original power. …The error of (the storytellers) here results from the fact that they admired the vast proportions of the monuments left by the nations (of the past), but did not understand the different situation in which dynasties may find themselves with respect to social organization and co-operation.”

-Ibn Khaldun, Muqaddimah ch.3 sec.16. 1377

Fair is our lot – O goodly is our heritage!
(Humble ye, my people, and be fearful in your mirth!)
For the Lord our God Most High
He hath made the deep as dry,
He hath smote for us a pathway to the ends of all the Earth!

Keep ye the Law – be swift in all obedience –
Clear the land of evil, drive the road and bridge the ford.
Make ye sure to each his own
That he reap where he hath sown;
By the peace among Our peoples let men know we serve the Lord!
Edwin Lutyens relished his appointment as lead architect on the New Delhi Town Planning Committee. He wrote to his wife as he left England in 1912, “So I go to India, full of courage & high endeavour in the likeness of that poor little knight that swore fealty to you some 16 years ago.” Lutyens hoped to immortalize British power in stone edifice, but cracks in its foundation were already visible as he began his work. The Empire entered the new century with a messy spillage of blood and treasure in South Africa, and strain on imperial resources only worsened as the British Exchequer tried to keep naval estimates on pace with Germany’s growing maritime ambitions. Land combat grew more expensive as well; the wars of German unification seemed to prove that military success depended on rapid and efficient use of railway networks and timetables, and strategists duly shifted their recommendations. Meanwhile nationalism, especially in India and Ireland, threatened to undermine the British Empire, and the United Kingdom itself, from within.

Traditionally, Britons and colonial subjects imagined the Royal Navy as the guarantor of security and of the networks on which the Empire depended to thrive, but by the nineteenth century the Royal Navy’s role had become geographically problematic. Queen Victoria’s writ now extended over vast interior spaces in Asia, North America, and the Antipodes, raising questions about how these spaces might be observed, defended, and interlinked. Decades of colonial railway development from the 1830s made some headway in easing the motive

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1 Quoted in Robert Grant Irving, Indian Summer: Lutyens, Baker and Imperial Delhi (Yale University Press, 1983), 166.
3 For a discussion of the role of the navy in the British social imagination, see Jan Rüger, The Great Naval Game: Britain and Germany in the Age of Empire, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
challenges of land travel. In the ensuing half-century, centers of political power across the Empire increasingly moved inland, away from the Royal Navy’s security cordon, starting with Ottawa in 1857 (hand-chosen by Victoria), the same process followed in Canberra, Pretoria, and Delhi, all in the four years between 1908 and 1912. In order to explain this phenomenon, it is necessary to explore the ways imperial administrators linked infrastructure, security, and politics. The political logic of railway planning in these cases reveals the role played by technology in making modern states out of colonial territories.

Using the examples of India and South Africa in the decade preceding the First World War, this paper argues that imperial administrators at the bureaucratic and executive levels conceived of railway planning not just as a method of managing imperial space, but as a tool that could turn fractious colonial societies into stable, centralized polities. Under this logic, railway networks transcended their infrastructural utility in the colonies as movers of goods and people, and even as ways to efficiently move troops. They extended the interface between subject and state and served as tangible monuments to the self-image of order and progress the Empire hoped to forge for itself. As colonial seats of power moved to Delhi and Pretoria the political balance of power shifted with them: the 1909 Indian Councils Act (known as the “Morley-Minto Reforms” for its two sponsors, Viceroy Minto and Secretary of State for India John Morley) introduced legislative advisory councils for Raj governors, while South Africa’s colonies consolidated in 1910 to form the Union of South Africa.

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4 At the expense of Sydney, Cape Town, and Calcutta respectively.
6 “Raj” here refers to the Government of India, headed by an aristocratically styled Viceroy as the agent of the Crown, a large bureaucracy in the Indian Civil Service, and cabinet-level ministers. This arrangement prevailed after
Both of these developments took place in conjunction with coordinated railway development plans. Imperial officials consistently described railways as constitutive of political order, offering a glimpse into the logic of imperial rule as a spatially and technologically contingent exercise in this period. Explanations of the role of technology in imperialism have generally fallen into two camps, with scholars such as Daniel Headrick using technology as the primary variable explaining imperial conquest, while others such as Robert Kubicek suggesting a more double-edged phenomenon whereby technology-transfer happens swiftly and complicates colonial encounters. The role of railway technology in India and South Africa seems to confirm the latter argument, as we will see, producing unintended consequences for the imperial officials who employed it. Furthermore, though historians usually emphasize other moments in the history of colonial India such as the 1857 Rebellion or the aftermath of the world wars as turning points, the period immediately prior to World War I captures a critical moment in the consolidation and centralization of state power in India as well as the advent of democratic reforms. Conversely, South African unification between the Boer War and World War I is an intuitively critical moment in its development as a state.

Focusing on India and South Africa has several analytical payoffs. To begin, the two were quite tangibly linked by Indian migrant workers who responded to the demand of South Africa’s mineral industry. Furthermore, both areas were fraught with social and racial tensions, and offered their non-white subjects precious little political recourse. Finally, the two colonial states also shared a railway-related administrative shortfall in this period. The contrasts between

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the 1857 Rebellion, when the Crown suspended the East India Company’s Charter that had authorized it to trade and rule on the subcontinent. Elsewhere, the term “the Government” will also refer to the Government of India.

India and South Africa also reinforce the salience of railway planning as a shared endeavor.

While British India’s administration was the centralized and quasi-autocratic Raj, South Africa’s was a loose association of politically autonomous colonies prior to Union in 1910. While opening India’s interior was a geostrategic necessity for the Indian Army in its defensive posture against Russia, opening South Africa’s was a commercial necessity for accessing its copious mineral wealth, and its white elites took a more inwardly focused attitude toward their security in a majority-black society. Hence these locations featured different preexisting challenges, if their governments’ operational response was to be quite similar. Imperial goals in both cases were to consolidate and centralize the colonial state’s political institutions and to placate its subjects.

Railways served as the linchpin of this exercise, as the colonial regimes in India and South Africa merged infrastructural means with political ends.

Early waves of scholarship on colonial railways focused on their effects on economic development and their relationship to British capital. More recently, scholars have turned to the issue of railways as agents of cultural change and as points of contact between colonized and colonizer. In an edited volume, Ronald Robinson has argued that railways were a critical point in the “collaboration” between colonial administrators and local partners on which the imperial project depended. The case of railway planning in India and South Africa in the early twentieth

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century presents an opportunity to assess how colonial administrators imagined this collaboration with colonial subjects, and how that collaboration broke down.

**India: Railways and the “Durbar Settlement”**

The Government of India hoped the advent of the twentieth century would be a special moment for the Indian Empire. Victoria, the first British monarch to style herself “Empress of India,” had passed away, along with a storied era for British imperialism. After almost a decade the transition to a new era had not gone as planned. The short reign of Edward VII gave way to that of George V, who felt committed to visiting his subjects across the Empire. Thus were plans made for the first imperial Durbar, or royal audience, in the history of British rule in India. To prepare the way for the peace and harmony the Durbar hoped to inaugurate, imperial officials introduced the Morley-Minto Reforms in 1909 and planned in secret for the king to announce the reorganization of British power in India, including the relocation of the Indian Empire’s capital from Calcutta to Delhi. This “Durbar Settlement” was meant to address three deeply rooted challenges for British rule in India: an uneasy post-Rebellion political climate, the paradox of rule from commercially vital but politically chaotic Calcutta, and the necessity of the Government’s annual exodus to Simla. Each of these problems was fundamentally linked to the colonial regime’s ability to manage space. As such, the Durbar Settlement hinged on an accompanying package of railway reforms.

The Sepoy mutiny that morphed into large-scale social rebellion in 1857 fundamentally changed British rule in India, ushering in a more centralized Raj in place of the East India Company’s Crown charter to rule and trade there. But the Viceroyals and vast bureaucracies of the London-based India Office and Indian Civil Service chafed both Indian nationalists and loyal
Indian subjects who sought democratic rights. Furthermore, the Raj ruled from Calcutta, the old Company headquarters. While government from Calcutta placed imperial administrators in direct contact with Indian commercial interests, it also exposed it to the fractious religious politics of Bengal and placed the interests of that province in constant tension with those of the greater subcontinent. This tension was palpable in 1911, when Bengal still reeled from the bold decision of Viceroy George Curzon to partition the province into ostensibly Hindu and Muslim halves. Finally, Calcutta’s warm and humid climate had since the 1860s forced the Government to relocate to the temperate Himalayan hill-station at Simla during the summer, a journey that took personnel and materiel forty-two hours by rail according to a government estimate. This Sisyphean ritual, presumed an ethno-medical necessity by Raj officials and even immortalized in an airy Kipling poem titled “A Tale of Two Cities,” provoked a storm of criticism from Indian nationalists over its expense and waste of resources.

The Simla exodus relied heavily on India’s railway network, which had already been expanded specifically to service the hill-station by the turn of the century at great expense (and eventually, financial loss to the state and investors). India’s railway network, densest in the north, was already one of the most extensive in the world by the turn of the century. In 1907 a committee on India Railway finance and administration cited its extent at over 29,000 miles at a total capital outlay exceeding £286,500,000. Notwithstanding the massive financial commitment, much of the Indian railway network was not market-oriented but strategic: India’s

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11 East India. Papers relating to the reconstitution of the provinces of Bengal and Assam, 1905, Cd. 2658, p. 17.
12 No. 4, Hardinge to Crewe. East India coronation durbar. Announcements by and on behalf of His Majesty the King-Emperor at the Coronation Durbar, 1911, Cd. 5979, p. 8. For a broader analysis of the role of the hill-station in warm imperial settings, see King, *Colonial Urban Development*, 7.
14 Ibid., 40.
15 East India (Railways). Report of the Committee on Indian Railway Finance and Administration, 1908, Cd. 4111, 11.
northern borders remained a perilous interface zone with the Russian Empire and troop deployment to that zone was the central preoccupation of Indian land defense. The Indian Army, as the largest infantry reserve in the entire British Empire, further illustrates the tension between interior-strategic and maritime-commercial priorities for British rule in India.

The functioning of India’s railways under this often conflicting set of priorities required spirited Government intervention. The extent of this intervention varied: some companies were both owned and operated by the Government, while others were only partially state-owned and run by private firms, and a handful were completely private, if subject to close Government oversight. \(^{16}\) New construction of lines and the scheduling of construction and repairs were done in consultation with Government bureaucrats. Crucially, the Government of India also guaranteed a five percent return on private investment in Indian railway companies to ensure their solvency. This guarantee attracted massive investments from across the Empire, yet constituted a heavy financial obligation on the Government itself, and by extension Indian taxpayers.

In 1905 the Government sought to consolidate its railway oversight under an India Railway Board which would bring strategic coherence to financial and technological policy and whose planning would smooth budgetary cycles. The creation of the Board followed an aggressive period of railway growth from the turn of the century. Between 1900 and 1906, annual Government spending on railways nearly doubled, rising from £5.3 million annually to £9.7 million. Around £50 million total was spent in that period, approximately half each going to maintenance and new lines. \(^{17}\) Government profits on existing railway assets increased

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\(^{17}\) Committee on Indian Railway Finance and Administration, 1908, Cd. 4111, p. 8.
proportionally as well. While gross annual railway earnings increased at a moderate rate over the
same period, net annual profits to the Government jumped nearly tenfold in just five years.\(^{18}\)
This remarkable shift came not from spiking revenue, but rather from the Government paying
down its liabilities on railway capital, the accruing interest of which had previously consumed a
significant proportion of railway revenue. A budgetary windfall of this magnitude raised
immediate questions about how it could be reallocated and put to use. Government of India
policy at the time was for budget surpluses to be consumed by purchasing specie that would
bolster the value of the rupee and thus preserve its Sterling convertibility, but the 1907
Committee on Railway Finance and Administration recommended pumping the excess directly
back into the railway system, arguing that as much as £20 million in annual railway investment
would not be too high.\(^{19}\) Committee members, not content with India’s 20,000 railway miles in
1908, aspired to bring the total to at least 100,000 miles in the near future.\(^{20}\) Issues of trade
balance are usually held as the foremost concern of British colonial rule in India,\(^{21}\) so a
realignment of budgetary priorities like this to suit infrastructural development demonstrates its
rising importance in the official mind of British India.

But rosy accounting could not mask the gloomier pretext for the 1907 Railway
Committee’s work, which was the receipt of “two deputations from the Indian Railway
Companies and from the East India merchants respectively, on the subject of the alleged
inadequacy of the existing arrangements for railway traffic in India.”\(^{22}\) It seemed obvious to the
committee that despite its bureaucratic overtures, India’s railway system was not serving either

\(^{18}\) Ibid. (from £228,949 in 1902 to £2,105,438 by 1906)
\(^{19}\) Gross annual revenue over the same period increased 27.65%, from £21 million in 1902 to £26 million in 1906.
\(^{20}\) Committee on Indian Railway Finance and Administration, 1908, Cd. 4111, p. 18, 13.
\(^{21}\) See for example Eric Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire: An Economic History of Britain Since 1750* (London:
Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1968), 127.
\(^{22}\) Memo by Secretary of State John Morley, Committee on Indian Railway Finance and Administration, 1908, Cd.
4111, p. 1.
the public or the commercial sector well. They recommended additional centralization and empowerment of the India Railway Board so that it could more effectively manage the maintenance and development of the subcontinent’s infrastructure. Its failure to do this through its two-year infancy, in the Committee’s opinion, stemmed from a lethal cocktail of unrealistic expectations and insufficient access to the Government’s cabinet-level decisions. The Committee summed up the problem and solution thus:

In view of the fact that practically the whole railway system of India, with a capital value of something like 299,000,000l., is the property of the Government, that great financial, political, economic, and military questions are involved in the administration of that system…it is manifestly impossible that the ultimate decision of large questions can ever be delegated to any authority “outside the Government of India.”

While the Committee felt that making the Chairman of the Railway Board a member of the Government Council would be a conflict of interest, it recommended that the Board have access to all Government proceedings and that its plans should not be overruled by the Government except on budgetary grounds. On the whole these recommendations show a centralizing trend and an increasing urgency to make the railway infrastructure of the subcontinent work toward the Government’s strategic objectives.

Meanwhile, at the top level of the Government, the Earl of Minto acceded the Viceroyalty in 1905, in the turbulent wake of his predecessor George Curzon. Minto had Liberal leanings and supported political reform for British India, which he pursued in partnership with John Morley, the Secretary of State for India. Their plans culminated in the 1909 Indian Councils Act, which expanded the Legislative Councils kept by the governors of each province in India, allowing for publicly elected members (between thirty and sixty depending on population).

Though the Councils could not overrule their Governors, they were meant to hold Governors

23 Committee on Indian Railway Finance and Administration, 1908, Cd. 4111, p. 25.
24 Government of India Bill [H.C.], 1909, 9 Edw.
accountable in matters of finance and the public interest, a measure designed to bring an incremental form of responsible government to India.

Yet incremental reform could not solve deep problems like Curzon’s partition of Bengal. Worse still, the provisions of the 1909 reforms called for the creation of a separate Muslim electorate, that is, a specific allotment of Legislative Council seats for Muslims, for which only Muslims could vote. This equation of political representation with religion only entrenched Bengal’s social tensions. By 1910, when Charles Hardinge succeeded Minto as Viceroy, he concluded that India’s troubled polity needed a more drastic solution, one that would enhance the Indian population’s legibility to the colonial administration and physically root British power in the Indian landscape. Railways would be his tool of choice.

Hardinge got the perfect opportunity to make his move in 1910, after George V gained the British throne upon the death of his corpulent father Edward VII. Immediately the Viceroy began secret discussions with Raj officials to announce a recalibration of colonial rule in India, using the new King-Emperor’s coronation durbar in Delhi as the platform. When the celebration took place in late 1911, George V announced that the Government would not only undo the partition of Bengal, but would relocate India’s capital from Calcutta to Delhi, where a shining new administrative district would be built. This Durbar Settlement, in addition to underscoring the king’s position as the dispenser of favor, allowed the Government to vacate turbulent Calcutta and Bengal altogether for an interior capital that associated it with the empires of India’s past.

For Hardinge, India’s railways were the key to the Durbar Settlement. He wrote in a secret 1911 letter to Secretary of State for India the Marquess of Crewe, “The considerations which explain its [Calcutta’s] selection as the principal seat of Government have long since
passed away with the consolidation of British rule throughout the Peninsula and the development of a great inland system of railway communication.”

It was no accident that Hardinge described railway expansion and British power as interlocked trends. After all, Delhi is hardly the Indian subcontinent’s geographic center, but it did lie in the region of India’s greatest population – and railway – density. The Viceroy was not lost on the precedent of Delhi’s historical role as India’s infrastructural epicenter when he remarked, “Throughout India, as far south as the Mahommedan conquest [Mughal Empire] extended, every walled town has its ‘Delhi gate,’ and among the masses of people it is still revered as the great seat of the former Empire.”

Hardinge’s further prescriptions for a stable future in India reveal a similar line of thought. Naturally reiterating that the Viceroy must remain the ultimate power in the subcontinent, he went on to add, “The just demands of Indians for a larger share in the government of the country will have to be satisfied.” The Viceroy continued, regarding a suitable capital for India, that “It is generally recognized that the capital of a great central Government should be separate and independent, and effect has been given to this principle in the United States, Canada, and Australia.” Finally, he reinforces the infrastructural dimension of the decision again by saying “Some branches of the administration, such as Railways and Posts and Telegraphs, would obviously derive special benefit from the change to such a central position.”

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25 No. 4, Hardinge to Crewe. East India coronation durbar. Announcements by and on behalf of His Majesty the King-Emperor at the Coronation Durbar, 1911, Cd. 5979, p. 6.
26 No. 4, Hardinge to Crewe. East India coronation durbar. Announcements by and on behalf of His Majesty the King-Emperor at the Coronation Durbar, 1911, Cd. 5979, p. 8.
27 Ibid., p. 7.
28 Ibid., p. 8.
While Delhi remained too hot for British officials to tolerate in the summer, the rail journey to Simla on recently laid track would be quartered in length, to around twelve hours.\textsuperscript{29}

Raj bureaucrats played their part as well when it was decided that the cost of building the magnificent New Delhi would be met in part by reallocating the Government’s budget surpluses yet again, a sum largely dependent on the balance sheets of the Railway Board.\textsuperscript{30} The Delhi Planning Committee, the body appointed to select the location and layout of the new development remarked, “Delhi is to be an imperial capital and is to absorb the traditions of all the ancient capitals. It is to be the seat of the Government of India. It has to convey the idea of peaceful domination and dignified rule over the traditions and life of India by the British Raj.”\textsuperscript{31} Railway planning played a central role in the design of New Delhi, as the Planning Committee worked with the India Railway Board to create a holistic new plan for railway infrastructure in the capital. Its objectives were twofold: to harmonize the incompatible rail gauges that passed through Delhi and to serve the massive new Indian Army cantonment under construction in the new capital. The infrastructural basis of British power in India is perhaps most obvious in these plans for Delhi’s military installations.

**South Africa: Railways and the Union**

Britain’s imperial project faced remarkably similar challenges across the Indian Ocean in South Africa. Frenetic imperial competition in Africa marked the late nineteenth century, and at the continent’s southern tip British settlers jostled with Dutch-speaking Afrikaners for

\textsuperscript{29} No. 4, Hardinge to Crewe. East India coronation durbar. Announcements by and on behalf of His Majesty the King-Emperor at the Coronation Durbar, 1911, Cd. 5979, p. 14.

\textsuperscript{30} For FY 1911, the year of Hardinge’s report, railway surplus amounted to £2,017,496, around half the overall budget surplus, quoted at £3,936,287. East India (Estimate). Estimate of Revenue and Expenditure of the Government of India, for the year 1911-12, Compared with the Results of 1910-11, 1912, 129, p. 2-3.

\textsuperscript{31} East India (Delhi). First report of the Delhi Town Planning Committee regarding the selected site with two maps., 1913, Cd. 6889, p. 2.
exploitation of the region’s resources and domination over its indigenous inhabitants such as the Xhosa and Zulu. As noted by John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, geography and transport dictated the region’s political realities; the foundation of Dutch and British colonies on the Cape of Good Hope must be understood in the context of the crucial maritime route from Europe to India, especially prior to the completion of the Suez Canal in 1869. The Portuguese port of Delagoa, to be discussed below, was so named for its role as a stop-over for Portuguese merchants en route to the Indian entrepôt of Goa. As the nineteenth century progressed, however, local natural resources became the primary economic focus in South Africa. An 1866 diamond-strike at Kimberley culminated twenty-two years later in the foundation of Cecil Rhodes’ behemoth De Beers Consolidated Mines company. Meanwhile, the interior Witwatersrand region experienced a massive gold strike in 1886, sparking yet another scramble for land and resources in southern Africa. Kimberley and Johannesburg, two of South Africa’s most important cities, began as the boomtowns of these respective scrambles.

South African geography, however, was poorly suited to large-scale resource extraction. Its inland river system, mainly consisting of the Orange and Vaal rivers, lacked suitability for mass freight transport. Furthermore, with two British colonies (the Cape Colony and Natal), and two Dutch-speaking Afrikaner statelets (the Orange Free State and the Transvaal, or South African Republic), each composed of various tribal zones and protectorates, southern Africa had no centralized governing body like India’s Raj to oversee and coordinate such operations. By the time of the diamond and gold strikes, carts and oxen still accounted for most heavy overland

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Eager to update their infrastructure to meet demand, the individual colonies embarked on ambitious construction schemes, but heated competition for routes, investment capital, and access to ports stifled progress, never mind the underlying ethnic tensions between Boer and British companies and colonies, and the African labor they exploited. These tensions lurked beneath the surface of the uneasy peace Britain won with its costly victory over the Boer republics in the South African War in 1901.

This loose association of colonial states under British rule in South Africa struggled to make the region’s infrastructure effective enough to meet demand for resource-extraction. Tariff levels and punitive railway fees for cross-border transport diverted a large proportion of gold freight to the port of Delagoa Bay in the Portuguese colony of Mozambique. Enter High Commissioner to South Africa and former First Lord of the Admiralty Lord Selborne. Selborne had taken the High Commissioner’s position in Johannesburg in 1905, and he made no mystery of his vision for South Africa: a union of the colonies under a single government within the British Empire. Like his counterpart Hardinge in India, Selborne felt he had no handier tool for carrying out this vision than railways and railway planning. Writing in 1907, at the same time as India’s Committee on Railway Finance and Administration, Selborne summed up the challenges of imperial government in South Africa with a characteristic flair for the dramatic: “Of all the questions so fruitful in divergence of opinion or of interest to the Colonies of South Africa, there is none so pregnant with danger as the railway question. …As long as the Governments of the

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35 In 1902, annual gold tonnage from the Transvaal was 29,000T via Cape Ports, 22,000T via Durban in Natal, and 14,000T via Delagoa Bay. By 1906, the figures had shifted to under 5,000T via Cape ports, 12,000T via Durban, and up to 21,000T via Delgoa Bay, a monumental shift. See chart: South Africa. Papers relating to a federation of the South African Colonies, 1907, Cd. 3564, p. 23, Appendix B.
five British Colonies in South Africa are wholly separated from, and independent of, each other, their railway interests are not only distinct but absolutely incompatible.”

Selborne referred specifically to the loss of business to Mozambique resulting from discordant railway policy. The High Commissioner and his associate Leander Starr Jameson, Prime Minister of the Cape Colony, believed that South Africa’s intertwined political and railway problems could not be solved separately. Here they foreshadow the words of Viceroy Hardinge. A unified South Africa could not function without an interoperable railway network, and the railway network could not be made interoperable without the oversight of a consolidated and capable state structure. Selborne practically sang, “This divergence, this conflict of railway interests, this cloud of future strife, would vanish like a foul mist before the sun of South African Federation, but no other force can dissipate it.”

Selborne and Jameson got their opportunity when a National Convention convened in 1908 to oversee South Africa’s political consolidation. The Convention reached a settlement by 1909, and the Union of South Africa came into being in May of 1910. The language of the Union of South Africa Bill reflects the new government’s preoccupation with the issue of railways and infrastructural management. In short, the Union instantly nationalized the individual railway lines that ran within its borders. The new Provincial Councils enjoyed control of “[l]ocal works and undertakings within the province, other than railways and harbours…” To oversee the consolidation of South Africa’s railways, the bill provided for the creation of a new Railway & Harbour Board, a full government agency which would enjoy complete control over planning and maintenance, as well as a dedicated Railway & Harbour Fund which would handle all revenue and expenditure related to state infrastructure. The Convention named one-time mining

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36 South Africa. Papers relating to a federation of the South African Colonies, 1907, Cd. 3564, p. 6.
37 Ibid.
38 South Africa Bill [H.L.], 1909, 9 Edw., c.4, p. 22 (emphasis mine).
boomtown Johannesburg, the center of gravity for South Africa’s resources and infrastructure, as the headquarters of the new Railway & Harbour Board.\textsuperscript{39} Like the India Railway Board, it would consist of a three-person committee with a ministerial-level chairman.

As would be the case in India, South Africa’s administrative elite felt that this newly powerful and centralized state required a capital city befitting its grandeur. Pretoria, the former capital of the wealthy Transvaal under Paul Kruger, was named South Africa’s administrative capital. In a unique twist, the Union divided ruling mechanisms among its major cities, reflecting the prior distribution of power in the region. Cape Town hosted the Union’s legislative bodies, while Bloemfontein of the former Orange Free State hosted its appellate court and Natal’s Pietermaritzburg received financial compensation for not hosting some government function. It should be noted that, owing to South Africa’s unique de-centralized government structure and its orientation towards the natural resource market, the Railway and Harbour Board was placed in Johannesburg rather than the seat of Government in Pretoria. Furthermore, while Johannesburg seems an intuitive choice to host the Railway Board as it falls within South Africa’s mineral center of gravity, it is remarkable that nearby Pretoria, also within the Transvaal and the same inland mining zone, was preferred as the effective “executive branch” of government over an historical maritime bridgehead of the British Empire like Cape Town.

Earlier in 1909, the Transvaal government moved to pre-empt the Union and expend its existing budget surplus on local projects rather than surrender it to the impending federal government. The first target for this expenditure was a new railway station for Pretoria. Next the Transvaal government set aside £150,000 to fund a new capital building at Pretoria, giving itself negotiating leverage on the capital question at the upcoming Union conference.\textsuperscript{40} A promising

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., c. 7, p. 29.
\textsuperscript{40} Metcalf, An Imperial Vision, 189.
young architect named Herbert Baker designed both buildings, using the railway station design
to vet his ideas for the new Union capital. He would later continue this work alongside Edwin
Lutyens in New Delhi. Baker designed Delhi’s dual Secretariat buildings, colonnaded much like
Pretoria’s Union Buildings, just down the Rajpath from the Lutyens’ masterpiece, the Viceregal
Lodge. Unlike Delhi, and largely owing to the smaller scale of the project, Baker’s Union
Buildings were completed in a quite reasonable three years at a cost of just over £1 million.

Conclusion

The Durbar Settlement and the Union of South Africa did not ultimately deliver the
enduring foundation for British power they were meant to achieve. The First World War shook
the political stability of both locations. Both colonies mobilized to support Britain’s war effort,
and were operationally dependent on railway systems to access World War I’s combat theaters
and to move crucial war material to port. Colonial railways in some cases even determined the
course of combat: the London-financed Uganda Railway served as the focal point of the war in
Africa between South African General Jan Smuts and German commander Paul von Lettow-
Vorbeck. The Empire’s war needs effectively monopolized the Indian and South African railway
systems, significantly circumscribing civilian use. Heavy wear and disrepair ensued as
maintenance capacity was diverted to combat theaters, leaving the railways crippled and their
companies bankrupt. The war proved divisive in both locations as the massive expenditure of
resources and lives forced many to calculate the tangible costs of their cooperation with Britain’s
imperial project.

The events of World War I seem to underscore imperial administrators’ success in using
railways to centralize colonial states, as this paper has shown, and the process undoubtedly aided
the imperial war effort by speeding up transfers of troops and equipment. Yet, their success here manifested in unexpected and deeply ironic ways for colonial polities. It was precisely because colonial subjects associated railway networks with imperial rule that their wartime disrepair and unavailability became an incendiary political issue. Mohandas Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj*, written in 1909, expresses his deep reservations about India’s British-financed and British-run railways, and the ensuing *satyagraha*, or non-violent protests, he promoted during and after the war tapped into broad dissatisfaction with rail service and included both boycotts and sabotage of railway lines. Though high commissioners like Selborne thought that unifying South Africa’s railways would unify its people, his short-term success in creating a centralized South African state failed to deliver lasting social unity. Racial divisions gradually undermined the Union, and it left the Empire along with India after a few turbulent decades.

It is perhaps fitting that Herbert Baker and Edwin Lutyens, architects and practitioners of the Empire’s political-infrastructural alchemy, finished their careers designing memorials for the Imperial War Graves Commission after World War I ended. Lutyens himself designed London’s iconic Cenotaph. In their own way, the striking and magnificent structures of the Viceregal Lodge (now *Rashtrapati Bhavan* or “Presidential House”) and Union Buildings are themselves memorials of British rule. However, though both India and South Africa have shirked imperial rule, each traces its infrastructural development and the centralization of its state structures to the colonial period.

South Africans and Indians, serving the imperial war effort with the help of these railway networks, actually helped extend British power in Africa and the Middle East in the postwar settlement. But the same railway systems that moved profit-making resources to market and

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41 For a discussion of how the issues of non-violence and sabotage were reconciled in Gandhi’s thought, see Prasad, “Tracking Modernity,” 499–547.
troops to imperial frontier zones moved political activists in the Indian National Congress (Gandhi included, despite his stated misgivings) and African National Congress to meetings as they challenged colonial and imperial rule. The power and profit of the British Empire indeed rested upon the ability to create linkage and access, but these linkages could be subverted as well. Conceived as a tool of imperial mastery, the railway networks sowed the seeds of imperial ruin by focusing and facilitating colonial protest. As early as 1912, Edwin Lutyens’ chivalric optimism about his grand project had darkened significantly. His wife patiently read as he lamented in a letter, “I suppose we shall give up India, leave our people in the lurch, as they have done in South Africa. Government will get into the hands of talkers and [the Indians] will be governed by phrases, as we are, and no one will be a whit the better and a good many a good deal worse.”42

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