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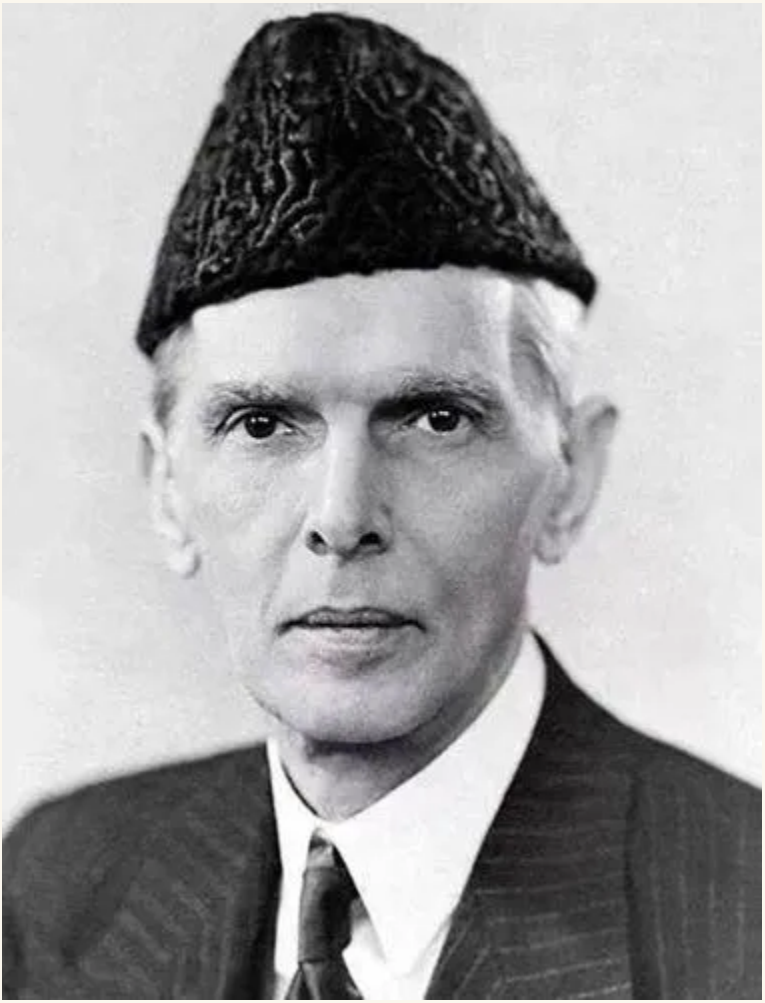
Direct Action Day

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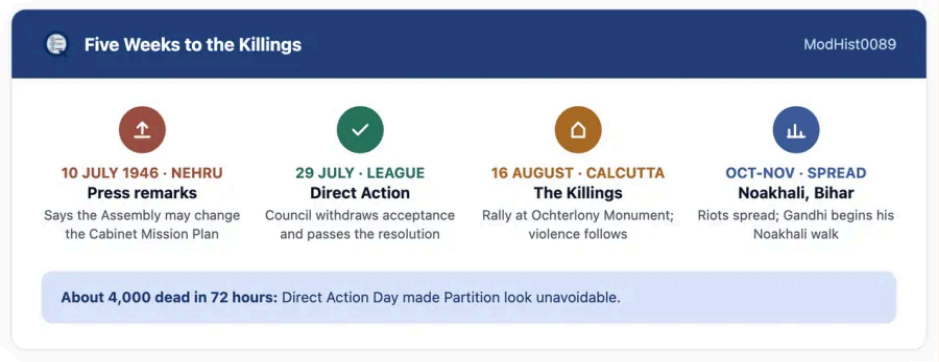
Direct Action Day

On 16 August 1946, the Muslim League called for “Direct Action” to press its demand for Pakistan. In Calcutta, that day turned into one of the worst riots of the freedom struggle.

This lesson covers how the League reached that decision, what happened in Calcutta, and why the violence pushed India toward Partition.



Muhammad Ali Jinnah, President of the All-India Muslim League, whose Council called Direct Action Day. Photo: c. 1945, photographer unrecorded, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.



About 4,000 dead in 72 hours: Direct Action Day made Partition look unavoidable.

> **10 Jul 1946.** Nehru's press conference rattles the Cabinet Mission deal.
> **29 Jul 1946.** The League Council passes the Direct Action resolution.
> **16 Aug 1946.** Direct Action Day. Violence erupts in Calcutta.
> **16-18 Aug.** The worst of the Calcutta killings.
> **Oct-Nov 1946.** Riots in Noakhali and Bihar.
> **Nov 1946-Mar 1947.** Gandhi's Noakhali walk.

Direct Action: the League's call to give up constitutional methods and press for Pakistan by other means.

Great Calcutta Killings: the name given to the riots in Calcutta after 16 August 1946.

Grouping clause: the Cabinet Mission Plan rule that placed provinces into three groups.

1 Why did the League pass the Direct Action resolution?

The Cabinet Mission Plan fell apart in the summer of 1946.

- The League's Council passed the Direct Action resolution on **29 July 1946**.
- It followed the breakdown of the Cabinet Mission Plan.
- The League had first accepted that plan. It withdrew its acceptance on 29 July.
- Jinnah accused Congress of "treachery" over Nehru's press conference of 10 July.
- The resolution said the League would give up constitutional methods.
- Jinnah said the League was bidding goodbye to constitutional methods. This was a sharp break from its earlier path.
- Its aim was to press the demand for a separate Muslim homeland, Pakistan.

> **Quick check 1.** Nehru's press conference of 10 July 1946 fully rejected the entire Cabinet Mission Plan. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

2 What did Nehru actually say, and what was called for 16 August?

The words mattered less than how each side read them.

- The League called for Direct Action Day on **16 August 1946**.
- Nehru did not reject the whole Cabinet Mission Plan on 10 July.
- He said only that the future Constituent Assembly was free to change its proposals.
- That included the **grouping clause**. Congress read the grouping as optional.
- The League and the Mission itself had read it as compulsory.

- Jinnah took Nehru's remarks as a rejection of a deal already accepted.
- In Bengal, the League government under Premier Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy declared 16 August a public holiday.
- The holiday left the streets of Calcutta open to large crowds.

3 What happened in Calcutta?

A big rally was followed by days of killing.

- A League rally at the **Ochterlony Monument** drew tens of thousands of people.
- Armed groups attacked shops and neighbourhoods during and after the rally.
- The worst of the violence lasted from **16 to 18 August**.
- About 4,000 people died in the first 72 hours, by the most widely cited count.

- Other estimates run higher, up to 10,000 or more. No single count is agreed.
- Over 100,000 people were left homeless.
- Hindus and Sikhs hit back in the following days. Both communities suffered heavy losses.
- Troops and police were slow to bring the city under control. Order returned only after several days.
- The event is remembered as the **Great Calcutta Killings**.

> **Quick check 2.** Death toll estimates for the Great Calcutta Killings vary widely, with about 4,000 dead in the first 72 hours the most cited figure. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

4 How did the violence spread?

Calcutta was not the end. It set off a chain of riots.

- In **October 1946**, riots broke out in Noakhali, in eastern Bengal.
- Reports of the Calcutta killings had stirred anger far beyond Bengal.
- Bihar saw heavy riots in October and November 1946.
- Gandhi was 77 years old. He responded with a long walk through Noakhali.
- He walked barefoot from village to village from November 1946 to March 1947.
- He visited around 47 villages and covered roughly 116 miles.
- He deliberately stayed in a different village each night. He faced hostility from some local League workers.
- Bihar's own riots hit Muslim communities hard, and they added to the sense of crisis.

Quick check 3. Direct Action Day made a united, independent India look more achievable to most leaders. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

5 How did it push India toward Partition?

After August 1946, a united India looked far less likely.

- Before Direct Action Day, some leaders still hoped for a united, independent India.
- Afterward, Partition began to look unavoidable to many leaders.
- The League's demand rested on the Two-Nation Theory. That idea held that Hindus and Muslims were two separate nations.
- Direct Action Day was that theory turned into pressure on the streets.
- Within a year, the Mountbatten Plan of 3 June 1947 set a date for British withdrawal and a split of the country.
- The Indian Independence Act of 18 July 1947 made that split law.
- The lesson is how fast a political dispute can turn into mass violence. A public holiday, armed groups and a charged rally all came together on one day.

Remember: Nehru's press conference was 10 July 1946. The League's resolution was 29 July. Direct Action Day was 16 August. The Mountbatten Plan came on 3 June 1947. The Independence Act came on 18 July 1947.

Think it through: Why might a public holiday make riots worse, not better?

On a holiday, shops and offices are shut, and many people are free to gather. Crowds can form more quickly, and large rallies are easy to hold. If armed groups are present, there are few normal activities to keep people apart. The holiday meant to calm the city instead gave crowds the whole day.

Practice MCQs

1. What event did the Muslim League call for on 16 August 1946, after withdrawing from the Cabinet Mission Plan?

A. Quit India Movement

B. Direct Action Day

C. Non-Cooperation Movement

D. Civil Disobedience Movement

See answer ↓

2. When did the Muslim League pass its Direct Action resolution, and for what date did it call Direct Action Day?

A. 29 July 1946, called for 16 August 1946

B. 3 June 1947, called for 15 August 1947

C. 10 July 1946, called for 14 July 1946

D. 18 July 1947, called for 15 August 1947

See answer ↓

3. Roughly how many people died within 72 hours of the Muslim League's Direct Action Day, in the Great Calcutta Killings?

A. Over 50,000

B. About 1,000

C. Over 4,000

D. Under 500

See answer ↓

4. Roughly how many people died in Calcutta within the first 72 hours of Direct Action Day?

A. About 4,000 to 10,000

B. About 400

C. About 50

D. About 100,000

See answer ↓

5. Which region saw major retaliatory riots in October 1946, directly following Direct Action Day's violence?

A. Noakhali

B. Punjab

C. Kashmir

D. Sindh

See answer ↓

6. Following the breakdown of the Cabinet Mission's proposed interim government arrangements, the Muslim League announced 'Direct Action Day' on 16th August 1946, an event that led to which consequential and tragic outcome?

A. The formal declaration of Pakistan's independence

B. The resignation of the entire Cabinet Mission

C. The 'Great Calcutta Killing', a wave of severe communal violence in Calcutta

D. The immediate transfer of power to Congress alone

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **B.** The Muslim League withdrew its acceptance of the Cabinet Mission Plan on 29 July 1946. It then called for 'Direct Action' on 16 August 1946, which led to severe communal riots, especially in Calcutta. ↑ Q1
2. **A.** The Muslim League's Council passed the Direct Action resolution on 29 July 1946, and called for Direct Action Day on 16 August 1946. ↑ Q2
3. **C.** Over 4,000 people died within 72 hours of Direct Action Day, in communal violence that became known as the Great Calcutta Killings. Tens of thousands more were injured or left homeless. ↑ Q3
4. **A.** Death toll estimates for the Great Calcutta Killings range from about 4,000 to 10,000 within the first 72 hours, with over 100,000 left homeless. ↑ Q4
5. **A.** Direct Action Day's violence set off further riots in Noakhali that October, and in Bihar the following month. ↑ Q5
6. **C.** Direct Action Day, called by the Muslim League to press its demand for Pakistan following the collapse of Cabinet Mission negotiations over interim government formation, triggered several days of extremely severe communal rioting in Calcutta, resulting in thousands of deaths and marking a serious escalation of religious violence that would tragically foreshadow the much larger-scale communal bloodshed accompanying Partition itself the following year. The scale and intensity of the Great Calcutta Killing significantly hardened political positions on both sides, convincing many previously hesitant observers that continued Hindu-Muslim political union within a single state might no longer be practically sustainable given the depth of communal antagonism the violence had exposed. This tragic episode represents a critical inflection point in the final months before independence, after which the prospects for avoiding outright territorial partition diminished substantially. ↑ Q6

Quick-check answers

1. **False.** ↑ 1
2. **True.** ↑ 2
3. **False.** ↑ 3

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