



# the south asianist

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**The historiography of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre: ‘an essential but unacknowledged strategy of empire’**

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Vol. 7, pp. 18–34 | ISSN 2050-487X | [www.southasianist.ed.ac.uk](http://www.southasianist.ed.ac.uk)

# The historiography of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre: ‘an essential but unacknowledged strategy of empire’

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This essay challenges the historiography of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in Amritsar, India. Drawing on colonial and postcolonial source materials, in addition to contemporary discussions and scholarship that places the 1919 events in the context of the *longue durée* of British colonial violence and historiography, this essay assesses the appropriateness of a potential centenary apology by the British.

The Amritsar massacre remains one of the most important and controversial events of British rule in India. Yet, many historians have struggled to interpret it due to the ways in which, in isolation, it can appear as an aberration. On the 13<sup>th</sup> of April 1919, Brigadier Reginald Dyer led fifty of his riflemen, composed of regiments of Gurkhas and Sikhs, to the Jallianwala Bagh where an estimated 20,000 Indians had gathered. A square wholly enclosed by the backs of houses and boundary walls, Jallianwala Bagh had only four narrow exits, which were broad enough for just two people to use at a time. A little after 5 p.m., Dyer led his troops in to face the crowd and within thirty seconds, without warning, opened fire on them. After firing approximately 1650

rounds, Dyer marched his troops out of the square.<sup>1</sup> Britain placed the official death count at 379, but Indian estimates have ranged to over 1000.<sup>2</sup> The disagreement over the number of deaths is typical of the uncertainty and debate surrounding the massacre.

On the face of it, the massacre appears to be a vastly cruel overreaction by Dyer to a crowd supposedly defying his proclamation against meetings, and therefore evidence of either a brutal state or one crazed officer. British historiographies commonly view the event as singularly atrocious and unrepresentative of the wider Raj. Indian historiographies, on the other hand, analyse the massacre as signifying the crystallisation of triumphant British brutality, which meant that

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Draper, *Amritsar: The Massacre that Ended the Raj* (London, 1981), pp.1-10.

<sup>2</sup> Savita Nair, *The Historiography of Jallianwala Bagh* (London 1994), p. 1.

India could no longer justify being under 'benign' British rule and led to the nationalist movement and independence. Two traits shared by these conventional perspectives is their acceptance of the strength of the British Raj, and of violence being a fundamentally new and un-British development, hence its analysis in isolation. Accordingly, the common periodisation of the massacre fits within the brackets of 1918-1947, following the idea that the First World War constituted the watershed moment. Influential is the idea put forward by Akira Iriye that 'the Great War proved to be the Swan song of Empires.'<sup>3</sup> However, a growing volume of scholarship, regarding the empire state in the nineteenth century, has revealed both weakness and insecurity as key traits, with violence being continually utilised out of panic and anxiety.<sup>4</sup>

This essay will begin with an assessment of the highly influential and much-cited speech by Churchill, before moving on to examine the problematic historiography and the uses and abuses made of the event in seeking reductionist conclusions of culpability. In light of recent historiographical developments and by placing the massacre within its broader historical context, the concluding part of this essay will explore the appropriateness of Cameron's 2013 statement at Jallianwala Bagh and discuss the renewed calls for an apology made in 2017, by both Shashi Tharoor and Sadiq Khan.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Akira Iriye, quoted in Kim Wagner, 'Calculated to Strike Terror: The Amritsar Massacre and the Spectacle of Colonial Violence', *Past and Present* 233 (2016), p. 196.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Condos, *The Insecurity State* (London, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Shashi Tharoor, *Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India* (London 2017), p.8; Sadiq Khan, cited in London Assembly (2017) *Mayor of London makes historic visit to the Golden Temple in Amritsar*. Available at [https://www.london.gov.uk/press-](https://www.london.gov.uk/press-releases/mayoral/visit-to-the-golden-temple-in-amritsar-0)

### *Historiographies of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre: British, Indian and sociological*

British historiography has obscured and marginalised its colonial guilt. Long-term continuities have been masked by the emphasised singularity of events such as the Amritsar massacre and the British response to the Mau-Mau rebellion. There has been a marked reluctance amongst imperial historians to engage in scholarship regarding lesser-known yet analogous instances. Where continuities have been recognised they have been with regards to other European countries, stressing the supposedly un-British nature of the atrocities. Susan Kent, a British historian, has argued that '[w]ith Amritsar...the country...had behaved in ways of the enemy only recently defeated'; whereas regarding the British response to the Mau-Mau rebellion, Eric Griffith-Jones, a British lawyer who served as Attorney General of Kenya from 1955 to 1961, claimed that British practice was 'distressingly reminiscent of conditions in Nazi Germany or Communist Russia'.<sup>6</sup> Seemingly, the fact that such actions were typical of brutal British counter-insurgency is hidden by British defeat of genocidal opponents.

British representations of the massacre have been highly influenced by Churchill's response. In a parliamentary speech, Churchill claimed the massacre was 'an episode without precedent or parallel in the history of the British Empire... It is an extraordinary event, a monstrous event, an event which stands in singular and sinister isolation'.<sup>7</sup> Asquith

[releases/mayoral/visit-to-the-golden-temple-in-amritsar-0](https://www.london.gov.uk/press-releases/mayoral/visit-to-the-golden-temple-in-amritsar-0) (Accessed: 07 February 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Susan Kent, *Aftershocks: Politics and Trauma in Britain, 1918-1931* (New York 2005), p. 85; Eric Griffith-Jones, quoted in Patricia Owens, *Economy of Force: Counterinsurgency and the Historical Rise of the Social* (Cambridge, 2015), p. 179.

<sup>7</sup> Winston Churchill quoted in Lachlan Cranswick (2008) *Winston Churchill's Amritsar Massacre Speech - July 8th, 1920, U.K. House of Commons*. Available at

agreed: 'there has never been such an incident in the history of our empire from its inception to the present day'.<sup>8</sup> By emphasising its singularity, Churchill and Asquith were able to condemn the event yet allow the image of empire to remain relatively untarnished. Churchill claimed, 'this is not the British way of doing business', highlighting that the atrocity was not a British responsibility.<sup>9</sup> It was instead solely attributable to one man, Brigadier Reginald Dyer. Synchronously, the nationalist Indian congress report described the action as 'un-British', as if there was some defined Britishness that had been defied. The British necessity to detach from violence is explained by longstanding ideas of civility, as well as ideologies of 'exceptional' minimum force. The British, unlike the French or Germans, supposedly did not bring violence to their empire but civility and justice, employing their specific skill in obtaining 'hearts and minds'. Bailkin has identified a 'longstanding mythic "peaceableness" of the British and the British investment in the rule of law.'<sup>10</sup> Standing in opposition to the implicit threat of violence which upheld British colonial rule, this myth obscures the historical reality, influencing successive historiographies.

Churchill's condemnation of Jallianwala Bagh was arguably made solely to preserve the constructed image of the empire necessary for its continuation. This was due to the basis of the empire in India; in 1873 it was argued that the supposed rule of law constituted 'a moral conquest more striking, more durable, and far more solid, than the physical conquest which

rendered it possible.'<sup>11</sup> That Churchill's assessment of Jallianwala Bagh was not due to a conscience with regards to innocent Indian life, is observable from his conduct towards India during World War Two. Churchill, over this time, diverted food stocks away from India, leaving millions starving. He did this not to feed starving people, but to build stockpiles of food in Europe. His argument was that the Indians were a 'beastly people with a beastly religion' and that it was their own fault for 'breeding like rabbits'.<sup>12</sup> Churchill harboured no respect for Indian nationalism, peevishly questioning 'why is Gandhi not dead?'.<sup>13</sup>

Due to its purported singularity and un-British nature, the massacre has been viewed within Britain as outside the national history and aberrant, and therefore not a matter for national guilt or intense scholarship.<sup>14</sup> This has highly limited British historiography. Two groups have dominated: historians of a military background for whom the event does constitute a matter of interest, being an important point in the practice of counter-insurgency, and popular writers who, attracted to the drama of the event, seek to bring the massacre to a wider audience. Neither of these groups have sufficiently tackled the complicated long-term issues surrounding the massacre. Generally, they have accepted the exceptional horror of the event and sought to explain it through Dyer's individuality, investing in the relative guiltlessness of the wider empire.

Nigel Collett (an ex-officer) in 2005 penned the strongest example of this approach, one hailed within British reviews as 'surely the

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<http://lachlan.bluehaze.com.au/churchill/am-text.htm>

(Accessed: 29 January 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Herbert Asquith, quoted in Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> W. Churchill, quoted in Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Jordanna Bailkin, 'The Boot and the Spleen: When Was Murder Possible in British India?', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 48 (2006), pg.470.

<sup>11</sup> Fitzjames Stephen, quoted in Frances Hutchins, *The Illusion of Permanence: British Imperialism in India* (New Jersey 1967), p.126.

<sup>12</sup> W. Churchill, quoted in S. Tharoor, *Inglorious Empire*, p.116.

<sup>13</sup> Churchill quoted in Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>14</sup> Derek Sayer, 'British Reaction to the Amritsar Massacre 1919-1920', *Past & Present*, 131 (1991), p. 132.

last word on Amritsar'.<sup>15</sup> Collett argues, following Churchill's line, that since Dyer is 'unique' and 'stands alone in British history', the massacre is an event which can only be understood through biography, stating 'it is therefore to his life to which we must turn for an understanding'.<sup>16</sup> Ian Colvin, a British right-wing journalist who was lead-writer for *The Morning Post* from 1909 to 1937, wrote a biography, under commission from Dyer's wife Anne in 1929 that tenuously praised the actions of Dyer and the army. However, due to its source and omission of key details, it was derided as a 'hagiography'.<sup>17</sup> Collett conversely condemns Dyer, evoking the creation of 'the Butcher' through events largely outside the imperial system. Described is a quiet boy who developed a fear of ridicule through being a butt of both bullying and classmates' jokes, and displayed unpredictable outbursts of violence from a young age. Collett links this to Dyer's bizarre statement that he continued to fire due to a fear that if he stopped 'they would come back and laugh at me'.<sup>18</sup> However, an 1896 work – *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice*, an official British Army textbook that is still regarded by many military practitioners as a 'masterpiece' – states that 'Uncivilized races attribute leniency to timidity', implying a military basis for Dyer's reasoning, one avoided by Collett.<sup>19</sup>

Collet argues that Dyer's introverted mind consistently displayed disconnection from higher authority in military campaigns. This

narrative is used to stress Dyer's personal culpability for the massacre. Collett goes even further by suggesting that the Raj did not intentionally place such a volatile man in charge of the dangerous situation in the hope of his radical response. He instead contends that 'it looks very much as though Dyer made his own decision to move to Amritsar and that he then sought to conceal this later'.<sup>20</sup> It is therefore implied that Amritsar was an aberration caused by one 'half-crazed' man's decision to illegally take control. The massacre is completely isolated from higher authority and anyone but Dyer is exonerated of any meaningful responsibility. In pardoning army practices, this narrative justifies Collet's military career.

Furieux was arguably even more influenced by myths of British civility. His idealised views led him to believe that no British person could behave in such a 'monstrous' way. Without further explanation, Dyer's actions were according to Furieux 'beyond belief'.<sup>21</sup> He went on to explain Dyer's actions thus: 'His mind became confused and he went on firing. It was already prey to the disease [Arteriosclerosis], which if he had been accused of murder... would have freed him of legal responsibility.'<sup>22</sup> In this narrative, Dyer and the wider British administration are completely absolved and the massacre is placed completely outside the constructed image of British behaviour. Furieux idealises Dyer otherwise as 'a naturally kind and humane man,

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<sup>15</sup> Antony Copley. Review of *The Butcher of Amritsar* by Nigel Collett. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland*, 16 (2005), p. 101.

<sup>16</sup> Nigel Collett, *The Butcher of Amritsar: General Reginald Dyer* (London, 2005), p. x.

<sup>17</sup> Shereen Ilahi (2008) *The Empire of Violence: Strategies of British Rule in India and Ireland in the Aftermath of the Great War*. PhD thesis. The University of Texas at Austin. Available at: <https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/bitstream/handle/2152>

</24033/ilahis66937.pdf;sequence=2> (Accessed: 07 March 2015) p. 358.

<sup>18</sup> Collett, *Butcher of Amritsar*. p.20.

<sup>19</sup> C. Callwell, quoted in Kim Wagner, 'Savage Warfare: Violence and the Rule of Colonial Difference in Early British Counterinsurgency', *History Workshop Journal*, 85 (2018), p. 225.

<sup>20</sup> Collett, *Butcher of Amritsar*, p. 257.

<sup>21</sup> Rupert Furieux, *Massacre at Amritsar* (London 1963), p. 177.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.



the vision of the stricken must have darkened his thoughts'.<sup>23</sup> The actions at Amritsar were merely a brief aberration in the Britishness of Dyer caused by severe mental illness. Dyer's later callous statements, which on the surface seemed cold and calculating, actually revealed a man wracked by guilt, clutching at justifications for his actions in order to live with them.

Furneaux was not a historian, but an author of true crime. This is apparent in his approach, which ignores the role of precedent and instead reaches an ambitious conclusion, powered by mythic Britishness and rumour, without any supporting evidence of Dyer's mental illness, or in fact of any panic on Dyer's behalf. Quashing this idea is Dyer's bodyguard – Sergeant Anderson – whose subsequent admission to Swinson stated that 'Dyer seemed quite calm and rational'.<sup>24</sup> Furneaux's book was hence a desperate attempt to maintain the British myth of peaceableness, following Churchill's assessment in condemning the event while highlighting the un-Britishness of the situation.

In contrast to these British interpretations, which, whilst preserving the myth of benevolent empire by lobbying guilt on Dyer, did not defend his actions, Lloyd, a military historian, embarked upon a whitewash in 2012. He insinuates that Dyer's actions are defensible as operating within a minimum force paradigm. Apparently, Dyer only kept firing until the crowd dispersed, a period that

was extended due to the 'unique' Bagh.<sup>25</sup> Blame, therefore, lies not with the Raj, but with Dyer's unintelligence and the potentially lathi-armed crowd that caused him to panic, a view that tenuously restates Furneaux's debunked argument. Lloyd argues that 'to vilify the officials who were tasked with restoring order during such difficult times as nothing more than vindictive and brutal imperial oppressors is to misunderstand their motives and perpetuate an historical injustice'.<sup>26</sup> In other words, military officials did their best in the trying circumstances. Lloyd's argument is anachronistic, ignoring the racialised nature of the state and bearing more in common with Colvin's fervent defence of British actions. Considering this anachronism, the result of a flawed methodology and biased goals, Wagner has derided Lloyd's work as 'imperial nostalgia of the like not seen since the heyday of the *Morning Post*'.<sup>27</sup> Lloyd argues that 'no amount of postcolonial theory' can unmask the decisions leading to the massacre 'only extensive research in the archival records'.<sup>28</sup> Archival infallibility is assumed; Lloyd believes in the accuracy of archival accounts and sees no necessity to interrogate the material and identify gaps.

Military historians consistently focus on the archives due to their reductionist approach that is focused on uncovering contemporary reasons for the success, or failure, of an engagement.<sup>29</sup> However, evidence has increasingly shown that British archives are

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>24</sup> Arthur Swinson, *Six Minutes to Sunset: The Story of General Dyer and the Amritsar Affair* (London 1964), p. 28.

<sup>25</sup> Nick Lloyd, 'The Amritsar Massacre and the minimum force debate', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 21 (2010), p. 382.

<sup>26</sup> Nick Lloyd, *The Amritsar Massacre: The Untold Story of a Fateful Day* (London 2011), p. xxxiii.

<sup>27</sup> Kim Wagner (2011), review of *The Amritsar Massacre: The Untold Story of One Fateful Day*, by Nick

Lloyd. Available at <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1224>. (Accessed: 5 March 2018).

<sup>28</sup> Nick Lloyd (2011), author's response to Kim Wagner (2011), review of *The Amritsar Massacre: The Untold Story of One Fateful Day*, by Nick Lloyd. Available at <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1224>. (Accessed: 5 March 2018).

<sup>29</sup> Taylor Sherman, *State Violence and Punishment in India* (New York 2010), p. 21.

unreliable. A recent study by Caroline Elkins on the Mau-Mau rebellion indicated that three-and-a-half tons of archival files in Kenya that detailed brutal government repression were disposed of, whilst files directly referencing the 'British' way, were kept.<sup>30</sup> Elkins firmly criticises military historians (in this case Huw Bennet) who 'fetishize' archives.<sup>31</sup> Taylor Sherman has consistently argued that archival over-emphasis obscures the intrinsically important yet informal spectacle of colonial control in India, thus incorrectly emphasising the mythic British rule of law.<sup>32</sup> Lloyd's reductionist conclusions concerning the Raj's competence are therefore unsurprising.

Equally problematic in Lloyd's assessment of colonial guilt is his attempt to diminish British violence; he utilises an epilogue referencing larger post-colonial death tolls to this end. He states that 'looking at the violence in the Punjab in 1984...gives the lie to the accusation that the British ruled the Punjab with anything approaching the 'iron fist' of legend'.<sup>33</sup> Such an approach bears similarity to Gilley's widely derided colonial apologist rhetoric in 'The Case for Colonialism', which argues that colonial rule is justified by the failures of post-colonial states.<sup>34</sup> Lloyd's approach exemplifies the historiographical danger often generated by imperial apologists. Comparative history should not be abused to

relativise guilt; this is an inherently reductive approach. Lloyd ignores the fact that the British massacre yielded zero British casualties, whereas the Indian forces in 1984 – when India's Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, ordered a military operation to remove Sikh militants from the Golden Temple – recorded 84 dead and over 100 wounded. Files released two years after Lloyd's publication implicated British government sanctioned SAS involvement in the planning of the attack, demonstrating Lloyd's completely untenable apologist focus.<sup>35</sup>

British historiography is clearly defined by a preoccupation with enhancing global respectability. Parallel to invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, military historians sought justification in advocating Britain's specific skill in counter-insurgency using 'minimum force'; they specifically referenced colonial actions.<sup>36</sup> Andrew Roberts, a fervent whitewasher of the massacre upon whom Lloyd builds, supports British counter-insurgency, advocating 'an active part in defending decency' with the UK's being 'one of the world's foremost moral policemen'.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, it is in the interest of certain military historians to wrongly create a narrative of the Amritsar massacre which sanitises army practice and protects British morality.

<sup>30</sup> Caroline Elkins cited in Patricia Owens, *Economy of Force*, p. 179.

<sup>31</sup> Caroline Elkins. Review of *Fighting the Mau Mau: The British Army and Counter-Insurgency in the Kenya Emergency*, by Huw Bennett (Cambridge, 2013) in *The American Historical Review*, 119, (2014), p. 654.

<sup>32</sup> Taylor Sherman, *State Violence and Punishment in India*, p. 21.

<sup>33</sup> Lloyd, *Massacre at Amritsar*, p. 208.

<sup>34</sup> Bruce Gilley, 'The Case for Colonialism', *Third World Quarterly*, pp.1-17. Available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2017.1369037> (Accessed: 5 February 2018).

<sup>35</sup> The Times (2014) *SAS 'helped to plan Amritsar Massacre'*. Available at

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/sas-helped-to-plan-amritsar-massacre-8qt6fnd98fx> (Accessed: 21 April 2018).

<sup>36</sup> Wagner, 'Savage Warfare', p. 2.

<sup>37</sup> Andrew Roberts, *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples Since 1900* (London 2008) p. 153; Andrew Roberts quoted in Daily Mail (2013) *Hideously amoral Little England has stepped through the looking glass: A top historian's deeply personal - and inflammatory - critique of where Britain now stands on the world stage*. Available at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2408040/ANDREW-ROBERTS-Hideously-amoral-Little-England-stepped-looking-glass.html>. (Accessed: 31 March 2018).

The narrow focus of British historians on the character of Dyer is also deeply problematic. Furneaux and Lloyd both argue that Dyer panicked and changed his argument in the face of Anglo-Indian opinion. They consider how Dyer was raised a pension fund of 26,000 shillings, gifted a jewelled sword and declared by Kipling to be the 'saviour of the Raj', yet both say little of the character of this widespread opinion and how it powerfully implies that Dyer was unexceptional.<sup>38</sup> It is debatable that even within the limited scope of the British in Amritsar Dyer was not the most radical. Cousens points out that one surgeon suggested dealing with the crowd through aerial bombardment, compared to which Dyer's response appears almost subdued.<sup>39</sup> A day after the massacre, three RAF planes bombed and machine-gunned Gujranwala. Official reports claimed 16 casualties, but nationalist historians have indicated over 100 as dying in an event Horniman claims could have been resolved with a dozen policemen.<sup>40</sup> On this basis, it was the British response that was hysterical, not simply Dyer's. Anglo-Indian support is unsurprising in this context. Dyer was neither unique within the Raj nor Amritsar in the history of the British empire. Therefore, to attempt to explain the event through either a 'unique and dangerous personality', is to obscure the commonality of his mindset and to whitewash the British empire. It is therefore imperative to look

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<sup>38</sup> Furneaux, 'Massacre at Amritsar', p. 180; Lloyd, 'Minimum Force Debate', p. 401.

<sup>39</sup> Richard, Cousens, 'Amritsar to Basra: the influence of counter-insurgency on the British perspective of peace-keeping' in R. Utley eds. *Major Powers and Peacekeeping: Perspectives, Priorities and the Challenges of Military Intervention* (Aldershot, 2006). P. 59.

<sup>40</sup> Tarlochan Nahal, 'Ghadar Movement: Its Origin and Impact on Jallianwala Bagh Massacre and Indian Freedom Struggle', p. 22. A paper presented at the Eastern Scholars Conference for the Sikh Centennial

beyond the individuality of Dyer to determine the reasoning behind the hysterical British response, as the Indian nationalist historiography has done, albeit in a highly biased and limited fashion.

Indian historiographies have promoted the idea that Amritsar was the murderous event that revealed the true face of British brutality and hence forced the eventual independence of India. The massacre was the planned punishment of Indians for daring to challenge the British and this blatant cruelty crystallised nationalism, an argument first put forward by Pearay Mohan.<sup>41</sup> Indian historiography clearly glorifies the nationalist movement. Whilst British historiographies have assumed singularity and embellished this with rumour, Indian historiographies have been guilty of similar malpractice in seeking to construct an unsubstantiated intentionalist narrative. A leading Indian scholar of the massacre, Datta, views Amritsar as 'the consequence of a clash between British policies and Indian opinion...an expression of a confrontation between ruler and ruled'.<sup>42</sup> The need for Indian independence is stressed, and that Amritsar showed India reaching incompatibility with British rule. Datta then draws on Colvin's uncited biography of Dyer and a supposed remark by Dyer to his wife of the necessity to get the rebels 'somehow in the open' to tenuously connect his interpretation to a conspiracy between Dyer and an informant.<sup>43</sup>

Celebrations. Available at [https://www.academia.edu/6850251/Ghadar\\_Movement\\_Its\\_Origin\\_and\\_Impact\\_on\\_Jallianwala\\_Bagh\\_Massacre\\_and\\_Indian\\_Freedom\\_Struggle](https://www.academia.edu/6850251/Ghadar_Movement_Its_Origin_and_Impact_on_Jallianwala_Bagh_Massacre_and_Indian_Freedom_Struggle) (Accessed: 21 March 2018); Benjamin Horniman, *British Administration and the Amritsar Massacre* (Delhi 1920), p. 157.

<sup>41</sup> Pearay Mohan, cited by Savita Nahrain, *Historiography of Jallianwala Bagh*, p. 4.

<sup>42</sup> V. N. Datta, *Jallianwala Bagh* (Ludhiana, 1969), p. 168.

<sup>43</sup> Ian Colvin, cited in *Ibid.*, p. 169.



Datta argues, '[i]n view of the elaborate arrangements made by Hans Raj and the CID to assemble the crowd in the Bagh and keep it there it is obvious that Dyer was primarily motivated by revenge.'<sup>44</sup> However, despite Datta's assertion that it is 'obvious', he does not illustrate an obvious link between Hans Raj and Dyer. He relies instead on rumour and hearsay, exemplifying poor culpability-motivated scholarship.

Unsubstantiated conspiracies that simultaneously glorify Indian nationalism and condemn British authority are also a trait of Raja Ram's narrative found in *The Jallianwala Bagh Massacre: A Premeditated Plot*. Ram diverts the guilt of the massacre away from Dyer, arguing 'Dyer performed his duty with thoroughness, according to the direction of his superiors.'<sup>45</sup> Such an interpretation is far more valuable to Indian nationalists, suggesting that it was higher authority that directed the unprecedented murder. Ram, an Indian historian, claims that 'O'Dwyer thought out a stratagem. It consisted of two stages: first to provoke the innocent masses to commit violence somehow, and then make a pretext to pounce upon them and crush them through force.'<sup>46</sup> In this narrative, Ram fulfils all nationalist goals. He exonerates the crowds of guilt for the violence preceding the massacre, proposing it was in fact planned by a strong, calculating and brutal state. Ram depicts the callous actions of the British to maximum effect, utilising the distinction between Gandhi and the British. However, Ram, as does Datta, provides no real evidence for his conspiracy theory. Ram's argument should be dismissed as much as Furneaux's desperate defence of

British civility.<sup>47</sup> Begum Ikramullah strikingly illustrates the issues raised by the nationalist Indian view concerning British guilt: "The death-knell of the British Empire was sounded the day General Dyer ordered the firing on 4,000 unarmed people...It provided the Indians with just the weapon they needed to whip up hatred...it gave [the] British the overwhelming feeling of guilt which had to be redeemed by giving India self-government."<sup>48</sup>

This account ignores that the British avoided direct responsibility for the massacre and the fact that it took Britain almost 30 years to grant India independence. By suggesting that it was 'guilt' that led to independence, British rule is firmly discredited. However, Ikramullah fails to acknowledge that similar actions had occurred previously, a stance that indirectly empowers the British narrative that the massacre was singular and exceptional. This narrative is therefore wrong on several levels. It was because the empire's typically repressive actions at Jallianwala Bagh clashed with a national movement that it had such an effect, not because it was a cruel escalation of violence. Tuteja has disagreed with opinions that define the national movement in Punjab as initially weak, arguing instead that the Punjab 'communitarian consciousness' which had been developing alongside economic and political changes since the 1870s had 'real potential for the evolution of a nationalist perspective'.<sup>49</sup> Nonetheless, the massacre is still used as a symbol of disproportionate punishment by an over-powerful state. Nahal proposed in 2012 that '[t]he Jallianwala Bagh Massacre occurred because people opposed the oppressive and draconian Rowlatt Bills...it

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<sup>44</sup> Datta, *Jallianwala Bagh*, p. 170.

<sup>45</sup> Raja Ram, *The Jallianwala Bagh Massacre: A Premeditated Plan*. (Chandigarh 1969) p. 140.

<sup>46</sup> Ram, *Premeditated Plan*, pp. 138-139.

<sup>47</sup> Sayer, 'British Reaction', p. 133.

<sup>48</sup> Begum Shaista Suhrawardy Ikramullah, *Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy: A Biography* (Karachi 1991), p. 2, quoted in Ilahi, *Empire of Violence*, p. 7.

<sup>49</sup> K.L Tuteja, 'Jallianwala Bagh: A Critical Juncture in the Indian National Movement', *Social Scientist*, 25 (1997), p. 36.

could only have happened with O'Dwyer's express approval'.<sup>50</sup> This assessment indicates the contemporary persistence of nationalist simplification and fuels Tharoor's misconceptions regarding the triumphant brutality of the British.<sup>51</sup>

Post-colonial theory has allowed a binary British or Indian historiography to be expanded beyond nationalist lines and challenged. In 1977, the American Helen Fein brought a sociological perspective strongly influenced by post-colonial thought and building upon Durkheim's ideas of crime and punishment. Fein argues that the otherness of India, developed through the social distancing fundamental to British life in India, meant that, upon opposing their rulers, Indians could be slaughtered for punishment without moral qualms. Therefore, the massacre was 'objectively a crime against the victims but understood by its perpetrators as a punishment.'<sup>52</sup> Fein implies that explanation for the atrocity lies with the structure of racialised imperialism in India and not simply the morality of individuals, an assessment giving weight to Indian narratives. Seemingly supporting this argument is one of the few accounts to have endorsed the massacre. Swinson – an ex-British officer turned military historian who published an account of the massacre in 1964 – emphasises the otherness of the crowd in his depiction of the attack on Marcella Sherwood. Sherwood was an English schoolteacher who was attacked on the streets of Amritsar during riots two days before the massacre. Swinson claims that the 'mob howling and screeching like savages returned to the attack', using animalistic analogy to

emphasise their sub-humanity.<sup>53</sup> Swinson believed that the Jallianwala Bagh crowd was largely made up of the same rioters, again 'being incited to murder and rebellion by the leaders' (an uncited claim), justifying their punishment.<sup>54</sup> According to structuralism, therefore, the space that Indians occupied within the 'moral universe' of imperialism allowed them to be slaughtered, diminishing the apparent singularity of the massacre via the argument that it was a symptom of a racialised state. However, an issue with the sociological approach is its degree of assumption and analysis of the massacre within a narrow frame – there is a distinct lack of historical context. Neither approach fully explains why Dyer killed such a large number and why the reaction was so panicked and hysterical, bringing to mind Bailkin's observation of the 'banality' of colonial violence.<sup>55</sup>

Fein oversimplifies complex British attitudes to civility. The British viewed themselves as raised from a savage state by Romans and vested with a responsibility to pass this civility to other groups. Derek Sayer, therefore, argues that the British felt deep paternalism to their subjects, whom they considered would revert to savagery without guidance, as did the children in *The Lord of the Flies*. It was their responsibility to father the 'less developed' nation. Backing this up is Dyer's statement that he believed that the massacre would do the people 'a jolly lot of good'.<sup>56</sup> This attitude supposedly explains the supportive British reaction; they believed in their 'horrible duty' to keep Indians on the right track.<sup>57</sup> British civility was, however, often infused with anxiety rather than triumph, due to

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<sup>50</sup> Nahal, 'Ghadar Movement', p. 1.

<sup>51</sup> Nahal, 'Ghadar Movement', p. 1.

<sup>52</sup> Helen Fein, *Imperial Crime and Punishment: The Massacre at Jallianwala Bagh and British Judgement, 1919-1920*. (Honolulu 1977), p. x.

<sup>53</sup> Swinson, *Six Minutes to Sunset*, p. 22.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>55</sup> Bailkin, 'The Boot and the Spleen', p. 466.

<sup>56</sup> Dyer, quoted in Sayer, 'British Reaction', p. 146.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

the prevalent belief that civility could be diminished within a savage environment just as it had been attained from the Romans.

A consistent assumption within the aforementioned historiographies regards the perceived strength of the Raj, either as generally competent and well-intentioned as Lloyd argued, or as strong and brutally vengeful, as described by Ram and Fein. However, Sherman has highlighted that states needed to rely on informal spectacles of power to survive. The massacre was part of an interconnected ‘coercive system’ and hence not extraordinary in style, only scale. The sociological otherness of the Indian stressed by Swinson created fear amongst the British, not triumphant brutality, that they themselves could revert to ‘savagery’. Mark Condos has concluded that the Raj was defined by insecurity and self-perceived weakness, indicating that the massacre should be analysed in terms of the reasoning behind its precedential anxiety, not its empire-ending aftermath and the inevitable declarations of guilt.<sup>58</sup> The massacre should be approached not from a standpoint that seeks to assign blame, but from one searching for what was truly important to the Anglo-Indian. Considering the controversial basis of historiographies that have accessed the massacre in isolation, a ‘thicker periodisation’ of the massacre is needed, one free from politicised rumour. Even Ram himself conceded that ‘what actually transpired among the few top civil and military officers of the Government in the evening of the 9th of April, nobody can know’.<sup>59</sup>

### *The Jallianwala Bagh massacre in comparative perspective*

The historiographical approaches outlined have largely been deficient, in either their ambitiously politicised framings of guilt or their failure to fully explain Dyer’s actions. More fruitful perspectives have been allowed by the increasing analysis of colonial violence. Accompanying this has been a recent shift of historiographical focus from imprisonment, the idea by Michel Foucault that ‘over the past two centuries, the deprivation of liberty has replaced other forms of punishment’, to study of colonial penal practices, as explored by Sherman.<sup>60</sup> Dan Stone has indicated the persistence of a ‘screen memory effect’ with regards to historiography, that the incomparable horror of the Holocaust ‘conceptually prohibits inquiry into Britain’s own historical record.’<sup>61</sup> Progressive research into colonial violence, however, has been fuelled by the continued advancement of Holocaust historiography and genocide studies in seeking the role of precedent. Michelle Gordon’s work on the dynamics of colonial violence has revealed the presence of consistent factors such as misjudgement, precedential memory and poor communication. These are all applicable to Amritsar. Kim Wagner, a Danish-British historian who has focused on 1857, takes a broader approach to the massacre than previous historians by recognising long-term continuities in the anxieties that drove each incidence. Amritsar appears similar to a firing squad, harking back to the ritual of public execution, the ritualised blowing of Indians from guns, which terrified the populace post-

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<sup>58</sup> Mark Condos, *The Insecurity State*, pp. 1-10.

<sup>59</sup> Ram, *Premeditated Plan*, p. 176.

<sup>60</sup>Foucault quoted in Taylor Sherman, ‘Tensions of colonial punishment: perspectives on recent developments in the study of coercive networks in Asia,

Africa and the Caribbean’, *History compass*, 7 (2009), p. 665.

<sup>61</sup> Dan Stone, quoted in, Michelle Gordon, ‘Colonial Violence and Holocaust Studies’, *Holocaust Studies*, 21 (2015), p. 273.

1857.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, Wagner argues, it ‘is thus to 1857 that we must look for an understanding of the Amritsar massacre’.<sup>63</sup> Wagner also equates these episodes with the mistaken situation of the lesser-known 1872 killings. In 1872, the ‘Kooka outbreak’, involved the summary killing of sixty-eight prisoners in the aftermath of a minor rebellion in a principality of Punjab. Like Amritsar, this caused a public relations issue at home; the threat of the rebellion had been limited and the killings were undertaken after peace had returned. As with Dyer, the perpetrator was heavily criticised at home but received the support of Anglo-Indians at large as he had supposedly prevented an uprising.<sup>64</sup>

Counter to arguments focusing on punishment and culpability, Wagner argues ‘the guilt of the individuals was more or less irrelevant to the real purpose of the spectacle of violence... the performance of colonial power pure and simple.’<sup>65</sup> Dyer’s rhetoric, consistent with other instigators of colonial violence, described victims not as rioters to be punished but ‘rebels’ to be feared and cowered. Therefore, Dyer was following precedented action. It was a decision to react to what it was imagined the disturbances could become, a mindset typical within the British Empire. Colonel Anson before dealing with disturbances in Penang claimed, ‘just before leaving England I had read the entire account of General Eyre’s riots in Jamaica, having no one on whose advice I could rely...I felt doubtful and somewhat nervous to the actions I should take’.<sup>66</sup> Implicated is that in their isolation and anxiety, colonial officials were informed by memory, not the reality of situations. Dyer feared the isolation of his small

force within a large, hostile city and looked back to the spectre of the mutiny.

Exemplary violence was the typical action believed to cower ‘uncivilised’ rebels, as informed by the ‘civilising mission’. However, British confidence imbued by the successful memory of exemplary force was misplaced and often had the opposite effect of securing rule in the long term. Considering its supposed efficacy post the mutiny, this myth was deeply embedded. This is demonstrated by Kipling’s explicit reference in 1890 to the specific utility of exemplary violence.<sup>67</sup> Discourses of civility informed action up to Amritsar. Colonel Jervois said of the Perak, ‘it would be insane to suppose that we have finally tamed the most turbulent of races by a few sharp defeats in jungle skirmishes and the burning of a few stockades’. Therefore, in order to avoid a drawn-out skirmish which would overrun the fragile coercive system, Jervois advised enacting ‘an imposing display of force’, through which ‘future difficulties would cease’.<sup>68</sup> Such an attitude reveals the fear present of ‘savages’ within the British, but also the pre-emptive nature of exemplary violence. Officials did not react simply to what was in front of them, but to what they imagined disturbances could become. The power of the mutiny motif pushed exemplary violence; it was assumed any future difficulty could be a repeated mutiny. Paralleling this was the 1919 statement of a senior officer in Delhi that ‘force is the only thing that an Asiatic has any respect

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<sup>62</sup> Kim Wagner, ‘Calculated to Strike Terror’, p. 189.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 206-210.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.

<sup>66</sup> Colonel Anson, quoted in Gordon M. ‘The Dynamics of British Colonial Violence’ in P. Dwyer, A. Nettelbeck

(ed.) *Violence, Colonialism and Empire in the Modern World*. (Cambridge 2018), p. 165.

<sup>67</sup> Kipling, cited in Wagner, ‘Calculated to Strike Terror’, p. 210.

<sup>68</sup> Jervois, quoted in Gordon ‘Dynamics of Colonial Violence’, p. 156.

for'.<sup>69</sup> Similarities of dealings in the Penang and Perak thus show the empire-wide nature of Dyer's mindset through the nineteenth century and hence the meaningless nature of Churchill's singular condemnation.

However, in opposition to the purely nationalist argument advanced by Tharoor that Amritsar was operated in triumphant British revenge, Wagner argues that exemplary violence was enacted 'not merely to preserve law and order, but to preserve their own lives'.<sup>70</sup> This ties in with Sherman's argument that the coercive system was in fact weak and easily overwhelmed, leading Sherman to maintain that in a crisis, 'tactics tended to be overwhelmingly collective and often violent'. This highlights colonial anxiety and panic, as the 'insecurity state' in 1919 was faced with the spectre of being overcome by a second 'mutiny' (which in fact it was not).<sup>71</sup> The brutality of British exemplary violence throughout the empire from 1857-1919 ranged from the Hut Tax war and violence in Perak, to the Amritsar massacre. This proliferation was arguably a consequence of indelible memory and 'civilised' concepts about the efficacy of exemplary violence. These factors when combined with the often-isolated man on the ground, forced through poor communication to rely on memory and 'discretionary powers', led to disproportionate reactions to imagined crises due to colonial panic.<sup>72</sup> An explanation for the Amritsar massacre hence lies with the idea of imperialism being the dominion of a few 'civilised' people over a large group of 'savages', the methods needed to sustain this morally bankrupt balance of power, and the powerful anxieties awoken once the idea that these 'savages' could rebel had taken hold.

However, as the inevitabilities of the moral bankruptcy of colonialism did not align with the constructed image of the British empire (as based on the rule of law), Amritsar needed to be depicted as exceptional to preserve the construction of the British.

The recurrence of marginalisation and a historiographical pattern of guilt-avoidance can be found through the study of lesser-known British historiographies of colonial violence. For instance, the Zululand massacres during the 1879 Anglo-Zulu war, 40 years preceding Amritsar. For many years the historiography of the war accepted the orthodoxy of glorifying a conflict between well-matched opponents, the honourable British and savagely noble Zulus.<sup>73</sup> Fitting best with this characterisation was the battle of Rorke's Drift. However, depictions of instances where British troops ruthlessly killed wounded Zulus were represented in the historiography as condemned incidents of individual vengeance.<sup>74</sup> Strikingly analogous is the British claim by Churchill and the British historiography that the Jallianwala Bagh massacre was both deplorable, singular and individually attributable to Dyer. Lieven has on a re-examination of contemporary sources concerning the Zululand massacres concluded that the murders were not merely attributable to individualised revenge, but a system of massacre and total war, where the British 'were only saved from a policy of genocide by the capture of the Zulu king'.<sup>75</sup> Therefore, guilt should not lie with individuals. Lieven argues that 'the slaughter of the enemy after battle, was not as most historians have suggested an overreaction by the white troops... but an essential but unacknowledged part of British

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<sup>69</sup> Brigadier-General D. H. Drake-Brockman, quoted in Wagner, 'Calculated to Strike Terror', p. 196.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>71</sup> Sherman, *State Violence and Punishment*, p. 14.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>73</sup> Michael Lieven, 'Butchering the Brutes All Over the Place': Total War and Massacre in Zululand, 1879', *History*, 84 (1999), p. 616.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 616.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 613.



strategy...emerging from the pathology of empire when confronted with defeat'.<sup>76</sup>

This 'unacknowledged' part of British strategy is arguably the concurrent pathology present in Dyer, which also led him to slaughter the helpless in response to extreme colonial anxiety, fearing of defeat. Whilst the setting, time and situation of the Zululand massacres is radically different, it is telling that in both cases historians wrongly diminished guilt through similar methodologies and modelling. Wagner argues that it is 'moments of acute vulnerability (real and imagined) that reveal the inner workings of colonial rule'. It was easy for colonialism to appear benign when not confronted; it was only when challenged that this racist 'unacknowledged strategy' which upheld the insecurity that was colonialism came out.<sup>77</sup> By analysing crises small and large, the British response to the Amritsar crisis does not, therefore, seem anomalous, but the typical pathology of an empire ordinarily based on ideas of civility when confronted with real or imagined defeat.

A British prime minister has never issued an official apology for the massacre despite that, as this essay shows, it is symptomatic of an empire-wide pathology. David Cameron's 2013 statement when he became the first serving British Prime minister to visit the Bagh therefore appears thoroughly outdated. It reveals the success of the marginalisation of exemplary violence, the promotion of mythic Britishness and the prevailing influence of the highly problematic Churchill in British historiographies. Indian descendants of victims

hoped for an apology and claimed one could assist in healing past wounds. Cameron, however, stopped at describing Amritsar as 'deeply shameful'. This failure is especially questionable when considering Trudeau's 2016 national apology to India.<sup>78</sup> Responding to Cameron's failure, a victim's grandchild questioned '[i]f he said it is shameful, why did he not apologise?'.<sup>79</sup> The answer is that Cameron did not consider it a matter of national guilt or policy as Trudeau did. He instead followed the orthodoxy of believing in its uniqueness. Cameron argued that 'we are dealing with something ...which Winston Churchill described as "monstrous" at the time and the British government rightly condemned.' Cameron subsequently claimed 'there is an enormous amount to be proud of in what the British Empire did and was responsible for.'<sup>80</sup> Cameron implies that what Dyer did was atypical of the British Empire, reiterating that the occasional massacring of citizens was justified by the empire overall being a force for good. That Cameron sees responsibility for the tragedy not in a pathology of empire was clear in his statement that 'those who were responsible were rightly criticised at the time'.<sup>81</sup> This is despite Dyer having received huge support and never receiving formal punishment.

Although, as this essay has shown, the myth of the British Empire being exceptional is one based on historiographical marginalisation, it is one that still prevails. The MP Liam Fox tweeted in 2016 that 'the United Kingdom is one of the few countries in the European Union

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 616.

<sup>77</sup> Wagner, 'Calculated to Strike Terror', p. 190.

<sup>78</sup> David Cameron, quoted in BBC News (2013) *David Cameron marks British 1919 Amritsar massacre*. Available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-21515360> (Accessed: 05 February 2018).

<sup>79</sup> BBC News (2013) *Amritsar massacre families: Cameron 'should have said sorry'*. Available at

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-21519719> (Accessed: 05 February 2018).

<sup>80</sup> David Cameron, quoted in The Guardian (2013) *David Cameron defends lack of apology for British massacre at Amritsar*. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/feb/20/david-cameron-amritsar-massacre-india> (Accessed: 05 February 2018).

<sup>81</sup> David Cameron, quoted in Ibid.

that does not need to bury its twentieth-century history.’<sup>82</sup> Regarding the nostalgic way in which the empire is still politically regarded, an apology in 2019 could, therefore, be inherently unhelpful. It would inevitably feature a carefully worded reemphasis of the singularity of Amritsar and a meaningless apology on behalf of Dyer and not the British Empire, especially when one considers that Boris Johnson quoted Kipling upon visiting Burma in 2017. History should remember Amritsar as a tragic illustration of the morality of colonialism and not avoid this in a carefully worded apology. Nonetheless, it could be argued that this is an irrelevant view; an apology is hoped for by the descendants of victims and they therefore deserve one, whatever its implications.

In this essay, several conclusions have been reached. Firstly, that mythic Britishness is something that obscures reality. If the British Empire was less brutal, it was by degree and not exception. This exceptional image has been created by assigning guilt to individuals, something shown by increasing research into colonial violence by genocide scholars. Considering an event singular obscures long-term continuities. Counter to C.F. Andrews’ assertion that in the massacre ‘British honour departed’, it is debatable that this honour and the ideology of ‘minimum force’ ever specifically existed; slaughter was often the British way of conducting savage warfare.<sup>83</sup> Secondly, historiographies approaching an event with a specific narrative seeking to assign guilt are inherently reductive and therefore often poor scholarship. This has been demonstrated through the oft poorly cited,

politicised British and Indian historiographies of the massacre. The most important and revealing method is hence comparative, to place the massacre within a long *durée* in order to understand how it could have occurred. Dyer’s actions were proportional in the imaginations of him and many other colonialists, fuelled by intense fear and not inherent racist hatred. Memory strongly shaped events, and to ignore it is hence incredibly neglectful. This is not to condone British actions, but to consider that history is far too complex to be reductively analysed within a pride or shame paradigm, something attempted by Nigel Biggar in the derided ‘ethics and empire’ project. Britain’s intentions regarding the civilising mission were not innately immoral, yet its impact could be considered so. Relativising guilt is similarly reductive and unhelpful; that the 1984 attack on the Golden Temple was named the ‘Amritsar Massacre’ within Britain appears a deliberate obfuscation. Considering that the 1919 Amritsar massacre is therefore innately misunderstood globally, Tharoor’s suggestion of education is the necessary step. The empire is nothing to be proud of. It was, as with any colonial project, sustained by exemplary violence.

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<sup>82</sup> Liam Fox (2016) [Twitter] 4 March. Available at <https://twitter.com/LiamFox/status/705674061016387584> (Accessed: 21 February 2018).

<sup>83</sup> C.F Andrews, quoted in Bhupinder Singh, *The Anti-British Movements: From Gadar Lehar to Kirtsti Kisan Lehar*. PhD Thesis. Punjabi University, Patiali.

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